

MASTER SWITCHES

edited by Paul Driscoll



FURTHER MISADVENTURES
IN SPACE AND TIME

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Further Misadventures in Space and Time

An Unofficial Charity Anthology in Aid of The Stroke
Association

Edited by Paul Driscoll

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Edited by Paul Driscoll

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For friends and foes alike.

*‘The enemy inside the friend. The friend inside
the enemy. Everyone’s a bit of both...’*

Steven Moffat
The Witch’s Familiar

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Foreword

There's something very satisfying about backing the villain, especially if they are the foil to a hero who is supposed to always win. We want to root for the underdog and we want our heroes to be vulnerable even if they do have superpowers. In recent years, the line between the fictional hero and their nemesis has been blurred more than ever. Sometimes the villain is remoulded as a misunderstood victim of cruel circumstance or abuse (Maleficent, Cruella de Vil). For others, there might even be redemption, whether actual or teased (Loki). Some villains are still allowed to be irreparably wicked, but only if they can effectively challenge the hero's assumed morality and mental togetherness (Villanelle and Eve Polastri in *Killing Eve*).

The Master – often seen as a pantomime villain, has never been just that (yes, not even Eric Roberts), and all three of the more nuanced approaches we have mentioned above have been used in *Doctor Who* to great effect. The seeds were already there in the Roger Delgado incarnation who would cut through the façade of the third Doctor's moral superiority and bring out a somewhat childish petulance and rivalry, but since the series' revival the blurring of the line between hero and villain has been at the heart of every story featuring the two Time Lords.

The John Simm Master is presented as psychologically damaged by his childhood experiences on Gallifrey, and the Sacha Dhawan incarnation is driven by the rage of discovering the lies and abuses of the Time Lords. Michelle Gomez's Missy effectively undergoes an enforced journey of penance under the Doctor's supervision. She does indeed find her redemption by choosing to stand with the Doctor against the Cybermen (*The Doctor Falls*), but before her life changing incarceration in the vault, her long game was to gift and tempt him with an army of his very own Cybermen (*Death in Heaven*). Along the way she had set him up with Clara to teach him that the two Time Lords are not so different after all: 'The friend inside the enemy. The enemy inside the friend. Everyone's a bit of both... A hybrid' (*The Witch's Familiar*).

What makes this collection different is not that the Doctor doesn't always win, or that the Master isn't always in the wrong. It's more a question of perspective. The focus of these stories is on the actions and reactions of *Doctor Who*'s go-to villain. These are the Master's stories mostly told from their perspective, but as

is the renegade's want, the Doctor is a major part of them.

In *Master Pieces* (2019) we explored what might happen to the Master's schemes if the Doctor never showed up. Can they have a life without the rival they are so obsessed with? Would they still lose without the Doctor's intervention? Indeed, could their nemesis's unwelcomed no-show be the reason for such humiliating defeats? Ironically, in almost every story in *Master Pieces* the Doctor was more present than ever... the shadow both ahead of and behind the Master's every move.

For this follow-up volume we wanted to put the Doctor back into the stories as an active character. We've given our returning and new writers the opportunity to explore the relationship between the hero and the villain by switching up the usual rules of engagement, whether that means using different Master/Doctor pairings, providing alternative interpretations of old adventures, or playing around with the concepts of good and evil, of hero and villain.

Some of the stories do have a more traditional outcome, with the Doctor getting the last laugh – but there are no guarantees. Read on at your own risk and be prepared to give the villain the benefit of the doubt. You might even find yourself appalled at the Doctor and sympathetic towards the Master. After all, there's a villain in all of us.

Paul.

6th September 2021.

N.B. In case it might look like an oversight or a snub, although we received some wonderful pitches featuring Jodie Whittaker's magical 13th Doctor and/or Sacha Dhawan's tormented Master, we have not included them here. This is an unofficial collection (in aid of The Stroke Association) and we don't want to interfere with the ongoing narrative. But if this collection inspires you to think up new scenarios for them and to write your own fan-fiction, then that would be marvellous – the Master would most surely welcome the extra attention.

The Many Faces of Weng Chiang

Joshua Wanisko

The four men carrying the corpse of a fifth paused when they spied an old man observing them from the fog. One glance told them he was no threat to them. A second told them his cloak had clearly once been fine and he might yet have some coin in his pocket. They were devoted followers of their god, but not so pious that they would pass up pickings as easy as these.

When her son had been slaughtered in the massacres two decades past, Zhang Wei's Nai Nai fled China with only the clothes on her back and her three-year-old grandson at her heels. The tale of their travels is an odyssey all its own, but eventually she found her way to London and made something of a home in the Chinese community there. She raised Zhang Wei to be a good boy, and although a Nai Nai sees more than any child suspects, she cannot be watchful at all times, and eventually her grandson fell into bad company.

Even though he had defied his Nai Nai to join the Tong with which he now terrorised the streets of London, Zhang Wei still thought of himself as a dutiful grandson. Was it not right and good to serve the great god Weng Chiang? Holy, even? And would not his acquisitions from this English intruder pay for silks from home for Nai Nai and perfumes and the most tender cuts of duck? Thus, he was able to convince himself that this was an act of filial piety when he held out an extended hand to the cloaked figure in the fog, palm upward.

The stranger's features were obscured beneath his hood, but Wei imagined he could see his teeth curve into a smile as he slowly reached into the folds of his cloak. From there, events transpired very quickly.

Although the gloved fist must have shot forward with tremendous speed, Wei did not perceive it in those terms. It was inexorable as it clubbed the temple of his cohort with the force of a sledgehammer. The man died without understanding why.

With his free hand, the stranger pointed a narrow tube at another of the Tong members and thumbed a catch on the device. The discharge lit the street with a foxfire flare of poisonous light. Its target shrieked and then he shrank. His body strangled itself as he was compressed down into a tiny facsimile of the man he had been...

A third criminal broke and ran. Wei would not. He would have what he came

for. He seized the stranger's shoulder, intent on taking his valuables, and pulled him forward roughly to look him full in the face.

Wei recoiled. This was not the face of a man. It was the death mask of a living corpse, a monstrosity from Nai Nai's tales of the old country. It was an abomination that should have died in the inferno that scarred it but lived so that the fact of its existence might blaspheme the natural world. It was a charred skeleton, animated by a vast hatred and a monstrous force of will. It was a walking nightmare. It was fear made flesh. It was...

'I am the Master,' it said. 'And you will obey me.'

When the policeman happened upon the scene five minutes later, he blew into his whistle and it shrilled into the night like a rooster crying out the dawn.

As Officer Garfield sat in the interrogation room waiting for the arrival of the interpreter, he was uncertain which of the strange pair unsettled him more. The cloaked gentleman was hideously disfigured, smelled of the crematorium and wore a profound and unsettling wrongness like a shroud.

But at least he wasn't Chinese.

The Chinese gentleman was quiet. Unnaturally so. Opium haze, no doubt.

'The interpreter will be here shortly,' Garfield said to the burned man. 'He'll be able to translate that nonsense jibber-jabber they speak into something intelligible.'

'Thank you, Constable.' The man paused and smiled. The effect was profoundly unsettling because it made it appear as if his teeth were painted upon his lips. He spoke to Garfield in a commanding whisper, 'It must be so dreadfully dull here in the stationhouse. Please allow me to teach you a game. It is a game of chance enjoyed by your Russian counterparts. A game of luck, of skill, of nerve. Their particular version of roulette...'

Outside, Li H'sen Chang removed his travelling cloak. What nonsense had the master's servants gotten into this time? He would teach them the price of failure.

He nodded to the officer at the desk and proceeded to the liaison.

‘Thank you for coming so quickly,’ the liaison began.

‘Always pleased to be of assistance,’ Chang replied. The only hint that he might not be a native English speaker was that his speech was, if anything, too precise. ‘But your services will not be required this evening. The interpreter is already inside.’

Li H’sen Chang betrayed his puzzlement only with a raised eyebrow. He knew of no other who could perform this service.

Within the room, the Master spoke words and the words became truths. ‘Every night, after you return home, you will take your revolver and you will play a single round of this singular game. You will play every night until you find the winning chamber. You—’

The door suddenly swung open.

‘I’m an interpreter. But probably not the one you’re expecting!’ announced the figure. Garfield shook himself awake with a start. The Master’s ruined face creased into annoyance.

It was not the dignified silhouette of Chang, but someone else entirely. He was Romantic. Byronic, even. The cravat adorning his outfit would have seemed outlandish anywhere else in time and space, but it suited him. There was only one man this could be.

‘Doctor,’ said the Master, his voice like an hourglass running out of sand.

‘Just so. Ah!’ the Doctor crowed, circling round the table. ‘Aha! I am here because I detected a temporal anomaly. You are here because you detected an anomaly. You are my anomaly and I am yours! Quite a pickle! Quite a paradox. Not even Scaroth had the same chicken and egg issues with his time travel experiments.’

‘Thank you, Doctor. I am quite familiar with my own reasoning. No need to stumble through your own clumsy approximation.’ He did not know this incarnation of the Doctor, and he smothered a desire to compress the smug expression clean off his face. The failsafes in each TARDIS tended to enforce a certain linearity in the sequence of one Time Lord’s encounters with another, but his symbiotic nuclei had been damaged as part of his injury, weakening the connection to his own TARDIS, and there was the question of the anomaly.

The Master continued addressing the Doctor. ‘But you have staggered close to the vicinity of an answer. Yes, I am in this era because of disruptions to the timeline. I arranged to have myself brought here to investigate a temporal irregularity, though I discovered a different one – you – rather than the one I was

pursuing. You cannot to begin to imagine the depth of my disappointment.'

The Doctor snapped his fingers in front of the unresponsive Wei, which caused Constable Garfield to question the professionalism of this interpreter.

'You two gentlemen know each other, then?' he asked.

The Doctor did not answer, instead addressing the Master. 'And you've mesmerised this poor fellow. Needed to bring along a pet cheering section? Disappointing. What is it you hope to accomplish here?'

The Master knew that he should remain silent and not respond to the goading. But he couldn't pass up this opportunity. Who else here could appreciate the subtle brilliance of his plan? The words erupted out of him of their own volition. Keeping his cleverness bottled up was such an ordeal. 'I have planted the seeds for a plot of surpassing genius,' he seethed, 'but a simpleton has attempted to take it as his own. I will reap the fruits of my labour, and I will harvest the life force of this interloper as the first morsel to fuel my regeneration.'

The Doctor stared, then drawled. 'I didn't know you harboured such agricultural inclinations, Master. Though I might have suspected as much since you always bring your own fertiliser. Has another baddie swooped in to steal your plot? Boohoo. Transform your TARDIS into a grandfather clock again and maybe you'll get here on time. That's the trouble with being the bad guy. No court of law for you lot.'

The Master shook his head. This Doctor was worthless.

'Will we be starting the translation soon?' the Constable interrupted. 'I have a dinner engagement.'

The Master stared at him. His voice was soft and gentle. 'Swallow your tongue,' he instructed, and the constable obeyed instantly.

'No!' the Doctor shouted, jumping over the table and forcing his hand into the man's mouth.

'Come, servant! We go.' The Master swept his great cloak about him. Zhang rose without a sound and accompanied him. The constable's madness passed and he drifted into a dreamless slumber.

The man in black fled across the police station and the Doctor followed. He seeded nightmares among those he passed. One or two would have been enough to delay the Doctor sufficiently to allow an escape, but he needed to hurt them. He needed them to feel a pain as great as his. Only that agony would salve his hearts.

And so, brave men wept like children under his hypnotic compulsions, or attempted suicide in the novel ways they were bidden. The Doctor could not

leave them, any more than the Master could resist tormenting them. Like the mesmerised men, each was a slave to his nature.

There was freedom in the madness the Master offered. Constable Burns wasn't thinking about his gambling debts as he removed his belt and looped it into a noose. Sergeant Krane didn't dwell on his wayward son or his strong-headed daughter as he adjusted his grip on his knife to cut off a second finger. And Constable Charles had no thought in his mind at all as he hurtled bodily towards the Doctor.

The Doctor was still plagued by the curse of consciousness. He would not escape responsibility from the decisions he would make. That meant he was haunted by every soul he could not save, but that is the price to pay for free will. He spilled Charles to the ground with as gentle a Venusian reversal as he could manage and touched his fingers to the man's forehead. 'Contact.' Normally the Doctor performed such actions with a certain level of panache, but time was more important than looking good, particularly when there was no one to appreciate the spectacle.

The constable shook his head as he threw off the brainwashing. Then the Doctor shouted 'No!' as he saw another man climbing through a window for a suicidal jump. As had been true for all his lives, he could save anyone, but not everyone.

But providence offered salvation. An elegant figure dressed in travelling clothes laid a hand upon the jumper's shoulder and whispered something in his ear. The jumper stepped back, pulled himself away and sat down to sob as if his world was ending.

The stranger turned to help another enraptured victim and the Doctor saw that he was an Asian man of unflappable poise. Between the two of them they quickly deprogrammed the officer.

'Who are you –' began the Doctor, but the other held up a gloved hand.

'I'm a mesmerist. But probably not the one you're expecting. Further introductions must wait. I fear the situation is such that our liberty is at peril. Shall we abscond?'

The pair slipped out through the front door, heartbeats ahead of the chaos that would follow. They hurried until they found an alley where they could discuss events in private.

The stranger offered his hand. 'The Celestial Chang, at your service.'

The Doctor accepted. 'The Terrestrial Doctor, at least until I get this matter sorted, at yours.'

Chang regarded the Doctor and began to fear he had misjudged the measure of the man. If Chang had been playing his stage persona at this moment, he would have quoted an aphorism amounting to 'The enemy of my enemy is my friend' by Confucius or Sun Tzu in the broken English he used in his act. It needn't have been something ever uttered by either of the august gentlemen; it just needed to sound like it could have been. He would have tailored the exact phrase to the audience because chief among his skills, dwarfing even the powers granted him by his master, was his uncanny knack for knowing the measure of those he addressed and being able to adapt to their expectations.

It was this talent that sounded a gong of warning. He lingered at the police station after he been told that they already secured the services of an interpreter. He had been instrumental in ensuring that he had no rivals in this arena. Consequently, a new arrival was of great interest. He saw the cloaked figure who had mesmerised one of the master's own servants and he saw the foppish figure who opposed him. The mesmerist was a rival to the master and if the fop was his enemy, then the fop was a potential ally. Chang had little doubt that he could gull him to assisting by finding the lever that would move him.

But now that he was speaking to this Doctor, Chang saw instantly that he was much more than a mere popinjay. Further, approaching him carried with it great risk, for Chang knew at once that this Doctor would soon penetrate any deception that he would present. So Li H'sen Chang attempted that most audacious of gambits. Honesty.

'I am Li H'sen Chang, servant to one with certain disfiguring injuries that prevent him from venturing forth into the world at large. I act on his behalf, seeing to his needs and serving as his hands and eyes.'

The Doctor was crouched down low. He raised his gaze and answered Chang. 'And does this criminal mastermind of yours have a name?'

Shrewd. This Doctor saw the meaning behind the words. Chang answered with care. The Doctor would detect an evasion as quickly as he would a lie. 'He uses the name Weng-Chiang, though it is doubtless an alias. And yes, this London has no love for the Chinese. When we act outside the law it is because our survival depends on it. But his crimes are minor, I feel, when placed next to the burned man.'

'The Master,' the Doctor said, in a neutral tone that somehow carried endless hatred.

'The Master,' Chang repeated, rolling the word around his tongue. 'I know you can't countenance my methods, but this Burned Master is a threat to my interests

as well. So, I will offer you my services.'

The Doctor smiled, extended a hand and declared. 'Thank you, but no.'

Meanwhile, in Chinatown...

Zhang Wei's Nai Nai did not trust this man her grandson had brought into her home. His voice was soothing and his Mandarin was flawless and his manners were impeccable. She still did not trust him. True, he was not from the tongs with which he had been consorting of late. That did not mean he was not a criminal. There was a wrongness to him that went deeper than his burns. He had been disfigured long before the flames had touched him.

The Master frowned. The matriarch did not trust him. That could prove inconvenient. He would kill her if he had to, but that could imperil his control over the boy. Others had broken their shackles for less. So he would appease her as best he could. But he would not forget this humiliation when he was stronger. He was weak. He was still a Time Lord, still capable of astounding exertions in extremis, but the fact remained that he was a man at the end of his lives. Dispatching the muggers, controlling the constables, they had burned the wick of his life. He had come here with a plan to rejuvenate himself. He would topple the pretender and destroy this new Doctor in one stroke and emerge stronger than before.

The old woman was staring at him. He twisted his twisted face into a twisted smile and spoke to her in her language. 'My apologies. I have been through an enervating ordeal. I will take my leave of you.' He left the room planning her murder.

And back in the alley...

'I see your hesitation, Doctor. And I understand it. I am an admitted criminal. A scoundrel of the highest order, possessed of powers unknown in this time and place. If you wish me away, you must merely say the word.'

Chang waited for the reply. But he knew what it would be. He was a criminal, yes, but he was a mystery to this Doctor, and the Doctor could not resist a mystery.

The Doctor shot to his feet so suddenly that Chang recoiled. 'Very well,

Celestial Chang. I'm only half a man without a stalwart companion at my side! However, not just yet. I must follow up on a lead alone. But please come fetch me if I am not back by midnight.'

'The man from the Yard is here for you, Professor.'

Litefoot responded without looking up from the body on the slab. 'Thank you, Percival. See him in, won't you?'

The officer nodded, though as we have established, Doctor Litefoot could not see him, and departed, returning momentarily with another man.

Litefoot cut neatly through the dead man with his scalpel. He peered at what he saw. He frowned. He widened the incision. He frowned some more. He felt a presence at his side. He turned and frowned at that instead. 'You missed something,' the man from the Yard said.

'I say!' exclaimed Litefoot.

The man from the Yard, who was the Doctor looked at the corpse and exclaimed himself. 'That man's dead!'

Litefoot thought dark thoughts about the calibre of man now being dispatched from the Yard. Small wonder they were always calling upon that consulting detective to solve their case. 'Just so. The autopsy would have been premature otherwise.'

'But that is Henry Gordon Jago!' His expression was stricken.

Litefoot consulted a chart near the table. 'Indeed. Are you acquainted with the gentleman?'

The man shook his head, 'Not nearly as well as you! Jago & Litefoot! Gentlemen adventurers. Bosom chums!'

Litefoot harrumphed. 'I assure you that I have never met this man in my entire life. And that is hardly unlikely. We're not of the same social strata.'

The Doctor began pacing around the body, gesturing grandly like the impresario Jago had been. 'You two have many years ahead of you. Or you should. Henry Gordon Jago should not be dead.'

Litefoot shook his head. Sad. 'I know that death can be difficult to accept. And we all process it in our own way. Perhaps you should not be here if you had a personal connection to the gentleman...'

The Doctor started free-associating as he moved. 'Ah, archetypal! Zygma energy. It's toxic. Timeline cancer, metastasised. We're not in the land of

fiction, though we're experiencing a world of patterns, not atoms. Reality has shifted to a substrate.'

Litefoot thought this fellow perfectly mad.

Li H'sen Chang plotted on his journey to his master's lair. He had failed to capture the interloper, but would be returning with valuable information. Would it be enough to ransom his life? The master was fickle, as one who styled himself a god of fortune should be. He was capable of gifts of great bounty, such as the powers he had granted Chang. He was also prone to murderous rages. So great was his capriciousness that tong members had died for offences so slight that they believed they had pleased him right up until the moment he killed them. His temper grew even more mercurial if his hunger was left unsatisfied. In his haste, Chang had not readied an acquisition for feeding. He hoped that his master had not been driven to anything rash.

He slowed his approach to the Palace Theatre. It seemed as if every officer in London was here. Chang turned to some urchins who were watching the spectacle from afar. 'Boy, what has happened here?'

The boy hesitated, doubtless remembering some admonition not to speak to strangers. But he shrugged and said, 'The theatre owner, the one who talks all funny, he got snatched up by a Phantom, he did. Came right up behind him on stage as he was introducing the dancing girlyies. We all thought it was part of the show until the intermission when that phantom bloke showed up again and threw the body right into the box. It landed right in front of the mayor's wife, it did. She screamed and screamed! Screamed until she fainted!'

'Thank you, boy,' Chang said and turned away to consider this development. So the master had allowed his hunger to drive him to desperation. Troubling, doubly so because it had been done in such a public way in front of this particular audience. Had his madness driven him to this gesture, or did he not even understand the consequences of his actions? Either way, approaching him now would be inadvisable. Best to continue to the rendezvous with the Doctor.

Chang was troubled by these unhappy thoughts as he entered the morgue in search of the Doctor. The chemical tang of formaldehyde stung his nostrils and almost covered up the charnel copper penny smell of blood. The coated medical examiner with his back to the door cut into a body with great enthusiasm and considerable finesse.

Chang addressed the man. This was either the individual the Doctor had come here to see or someone who could direct him to that personage. He cleared his throat and said, 'Hello. I am here to speak to the pathologist,' reasoning it would be better to ask for that man than for the Doctor.

The technician turned and removed his mask. 'I'm the pathologist, but probably not the one you're expecting.'

Chang pursed his lips. 'Doctor.'

'Celestial Chang!' The Doctor said, wiping his hands on the apron. He threw a sheet over the body. A gentleman that Chang didn't recognise emerged from the back and looked around quizzically.

The Doctor nodded at him and said, 'I prevailed upon the estimable Professor Litefoot to examine the body, as I felt I might have some particular insight into this man's injuries. They are as I suspected, the product of your master's rejuvenation process. The unfortunate Mister Jago was a poor subject and his life will have only prolonged Weng Chiang's for a brief time.'

Litefoot looked from Chang to the Doctor in confusion, but the Doctor continued speaking. He threw an arm around Chang and steered him out of the building. 'Walk with me, Celestial Chang. Unless I miss my guess, and I very much doubt that I do, you attempted to contact your master and you were unsuccessful. In a past life I would have played this game. I would pretend to be fooled and then unveil my master plan when you led me to your master with the intent to betray me. But I am the little schemer no more. So I'm going to offer you an opportunity once again. You throw in with me all the way. Not to clear the field for your master. But to throw him down.'

Chang looked up at the night sky. In China, as a boy, he could see the stars, but in London they hid their faces. He knew it was because the lights here were too bright, but couldn't help but believe on some level that it was due to his loss of innocence. He remembered the name of the boy the Burned Master had enslaved. Wei. And the boy he had been twenty years ago was not so different from Wei. Both peasants, seeking a better life, not caring how they attained it. Selling their soul piece by piece.

That dream of a better life was gone. The master would kill him the next time they met. If his life was forfeit already, why not bite the hand of the executioner? Chang looked down from the heavens and into the eyes of this Terrestrial Doctor. 'Yes, Doctor. You will have my aid in this.'

The Doctor clapped his hands together and then clapped Chang on the back in an uncomfortable display of unwarranted familiarity. 'Splendid! Now, where to,

my good man?!'

Chang ruminated for a long moment. 'Chinatown. The boy he has ensorcelled will be able to hide him and the London police seldom venture deep.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Yes. But it's not sorcery. It's mesmerism. You should know better.'

'Just so,' answered Chang, already reconsidering his bargain.

The Doctor began pacing and stopped abruptly midstep. 'The boy. What is his name?'

'Zhang Wei.'

'And do you know where this Wei resides?' Chang was very slightly impressed that the Doctor understood their naming conventions.

'No. We were not friends. But the neighbourhood is not large. I can locate him swiftly.'

'Do it. The Master is the monster of which your Weng-Chiang is only a shadow.'

Chang returned from his investigations after several hours. Dawn was stretching her fingers across the morning sky by then, but neither man was tired. The Doctor was mostly troubled by the absence of the anomalies that had guided his investigation up to this point. Had the Master somehow managed to conceal them?

The Doctor had been drawing calculations in the dirt but shot to his feet. 'Celestial Chang! What have you learned?'

Chang stood serenely, arms folded in his sleeves. 'He was here, but he departed recently in order to confront Weng-Chiang.'

'Show me what you found.'

Chang nodded and guided the Doctor to the flat that Zhang Wei had shared with his Nai Nai. Splinters of shattered furniture littered the floor, and blood mixed with broken bottles of spices in a grotesque kind of alchemy. The boy and the old woman lay dead amongst the ruins. Chang hadn't believed that the Doctor was capable of making any expression other than that empty-headed grin, but now he wore a mask of grim determination. He analysed the room with his matchless mind, assessing it like that Baker Street detective. Then he picked up a child's toy in the corner and held it in front of Chang. 'Who was this?'

Chang looked at the doll. 'It is a doll in the likeness of Mister Sin. He serves

Weng-Chiang.'

The Doctor began poking at the doll. He held its head between two fingers and then pressed on its back. 'It's not a doll. The Master possesses a weapon that will do this to its victims.' He prodded at the doll and added, 'Even a cyborg such as Mr. Sin.' He gestured at the floor. 'Look at them. They have no defensive wounds. The Master must have commanded them to protect him and they did so with no regard for their own safety. They charged Mr. Sin, he cut them down and the Master used their sacrifice to kill Mr. Sin with the tissue compression eliminator.'

He stared at the doll again, boiling with such controlled rage that Chang believed that his body would burn the hand of anyone who touched it. With a sudden jerk he tore Mr. Sin's head from its body and crushed it underfoot. 'Can you follow him?'

'Yes, the Mast- Weng-Chiang's lair is accessible through the sewers beneath the theatre. The path boasts several fearsome guardians, but it remains our best avenue.' Chang led the Doctor to an access tunnel and they descended into London's surprisingly spacious sewers.

They walked amongst the dark and the filth until the Doctor suddenly asked, 'How long have you known Weng-Chiang's true nature?'

Chang was several steps ahead of the Doctor and did not turn to look at him as he answered. 'That he is not a god? I do not know. I have harboured these suspicions for a long time, but I cannot tell you the exact moment they sharpened into certainty. I have served him for twenty years. One cannot maintain such a masquerade for that length unless the other party is extraordinarily foolish and whatever else you think of me Doctor, I think we can agree that I am not foolish.'

'No,' mused the Doctor. 'Certainly not. I wonder if the real Chang feels this way.'

Chang stopped and turned. 'The real Chang?'

'Yes... The Zygma energy employed by your master has created... I want to call it a divergent universe, but that name is already taken. I named it a temporal cancer when speaking to Professor Litefoot and that's not wrong. It's a malignant tumour on the body of time and we are living in a side story taking place adjacent to the real one. Once Weng-Chiang is defeated and his apparatus destroyed, history will resume its normal course.'

Pain shadowed the serenity of Chang's face. 'This troubles me, Doctor. I am not proud of the crimes I committed in Weng-Chiang's service, of the man I

became. As you have concluded, I approached you as part of a ruse, so that I might clear a path for him. Now I wish to topple him from his tall and narrow pedestal. It's not entirely for altruistic reasons. I wished to find a path to redemption. Did you know that I was scheduled to perform in the palace of Queen Victoria? I was so proud of how far I had come from my humble beginnings, but I would trade it all back, everything, for the innocence I once enjoyed. I thought that destroying Weng-Chiang and your Burned Master would serve as some measure of penance. But you say instead that my deeds will be written over like a palimpsest. Why bother with the struggle then?'

The Doctor's expression was tortured. His voice was low, but it echoed flatly in the confines of the sewer. 'I don't know the fullness of your deeds, Li H'sen Chang, but I do believe in your desire for atonement. I know the difference between shadows and reality. Yes, you have understood me correctly. Most likely the recent past here in this polyp of time will be overwritten as if it had never occurred. But perhaps I spoke inelegantly. Much will depend on the outcome of our encounter. The most likely resolution is that the course of events that would have transpired without the Master's presence will hold sway, and the 'official' history, the timeline we now occupy, will be relegated to the dustbin. But that is not to say that your actions now will be without purpose. You spoke of a palimpsest, a scroll which has been used, cleaned, and then used again to hold a new story. Oftentimes, the previous writing is visible to the discerning eye and it exerts a subtle influence on the new document. A man's life is not a scroll, but do you take my meaning?'

'Perhaps,' said Chang, unconvinced. He began walking.

The Doctor added, 'Besides, I have been in more moments of crisis than you've had hot dinners, and it's been my experience that those moments reveal the character that was already there. If you can change, this virtue was always within you, and it dwells within your counterpart. In fact—'

'Hold,' Chang said, stopping and raising his hand. 'There is something up ahead.'

'Indeed,' said the Doctor, peering through the dimness, 'but what is it?' Something small and still lay on the ground next to a bizarre squirming pillar.

They waited for the length of several heartbeats, then the Doctor jumped forward with sudden enthusiasm, his curiosity excited. Chang followed at a distance. 'Be on your guard, Doctor. Weng-Chiang's giant rat patrols these tunnels.'

'Not anymore,' the Doctor said, picking up the dead creature by its tail. 'It's a

rat, but probably not the one you're expecting. Miniaturised giant rat. Shrunk down to normal size. I'm sure there's a moral in there somewhere, but I don't know what it is.' He opened its eyes and pulled back its gums to examine its teeth. 'Nasty bit of work, that. The Rani would have loved him.'

Chang approached closer and saw that the pillar he had been unable to identify was four box turtles stacked upside down on top of each other. That would not have been his first guess. 'What are these turtles doing here?'

The Doctor glanced at them. 'Learning martial arts from the rat, one presumes.'

Chang was utterly baffled. 'I beg your pardon?'

The Doctor scowled. 'Never mind. The Master is in a race against death itself, but he's never too busy for an act of petty cruelty.' The Doctor already knew that Chang was human, but he still asked him, 'Why aren't you helping the turtle?'

'Of course.' Chang smiled weakly and took a turtle in either hand and flipped them over and placed them right side up on the ground. They began crawling away without so much as a thank you. The Doctor flipped the top turtle over and picked up the remaining creature. There was something directly beneath it. It had been concealing a small metal disc with a digital timer. As the Doctor noticed it, the number changed from 3 to 2.

'Doctor! Get down!' Chang shouted, tackling the Doctor out of the way and into the sewer water just as the small explosion erupted.

The pair surfaced a moment later. The Doctor smacked himself on the forehead. 'Foolish, Doctor! Foolish! Fancy thinking it was turtles all the way down.'

'At least we survived,' Chang said, climbing out of the water. He brushed shell fragments off his shoulder.

'It wasn't meant to kill us,' the Doctor said. 'We are close to Weng-Chiang's inner sanctum, are we not? This was to offer the Master a warning of our approach.'

Chang murmured agreement. The Doctor then said, 'Also, did you just risk your life to save mine?'

'I suppose I did. I don't know if we'll find the Burned Master or Weng-Chiang in there, but I know I'll need an ally.'

The Doctor grinned so broadly that he looked like an earlier incarnation. 'Oh no! That's not it. You weren't calculating. You were acting on instinct. You wanted to protect me. I do believe there is hope for you yet, Li H'sen Chang. Now, are you ready to topple a god?'

‘If you’ve seen one evil lair, you’ve seen them all,’ the Doctor said to Chang in a hushed whisper as they navigated the lair.

‘Quiet, Doctor. We’re not writing a travelogue,’ Chang whispered back.

‘All the same,’ the Doctor went on, ‘Dark, dank, foreboding. Chilly. Nothing but black and very dark grey. Needlessly sinister. Pointlessly sinister. Talk about the banality of evil.’

A low voice purred from the darkness. ‘Doctor... you disapprove of the configuration? But I assure you, it grants me excellent Feng Shui.’

A light blazed and Weng-Chiang stood before them in the gloom, unmistakable in his armour. ‘What brings you to my humble abode, travellers?’

‘Master!’ Chang cried. The word escaped from him unbidden.

The armoured figure turned to regard him. ‘Ah... Li H’sen Chang. The humble servant. Yes, the Master. But probably not the one you’re expecting!’ He raised the visor on the helmet to reveal the ruined face of the Master.

His eyes blazed. ‘Your Weng-Chiang was nothing but a pale imitation of my majesty! I am the Master! He was a second-rate imitation, a shadow of a shadow! A petty bureaucrat who glimpsed a daydream and sold his soul to make it real! A pitiful pantomime villain! A corpse with not the wit to know it should be dead!’

The Doctor made a show of looking about. ‘Not a mirror in the place. That’s appropriate. Because I’m afraid I’ve got some bad news for you...’

The Master’s face twisted into a grotesque smile as his rage ebbed below the surface. His voice once again purred like poisoned honey. ‘And I for you, my dear Doctor. This Weng-Chiang employed a catalytic extraction chamber to siphon the energies of his victims. Absurdly primitive and impracticably immobile. In the short time I have been here, I have made certain improvements. Specifically, it now functions at a distance. Now, hold still, Doctor. I don’t know how many regenerations you have remaining, but I will take all of them, and then I will take your TARDIS and finally I will take my vengeance upon all those who have thwarted me.’

The Master flipped a concealed switch and the Doctor suddenly writhed as he was ignited by the Master’s alchemical tempest, crucified by wildfire.

The Master drew close enough that the Doctor could feel the heat of his burns radiating off his body. ‘Did you really believe you could thwart my exquisitely

laid plans? I doubt you could even have stopped the simplistic ruse of this charlatan I dispatched. And where is your companion? The Celestial Chang? Has he abandoned you to sail among the stars? Or is it something more mundane? Fled to his Chinatown to save his hide?’

A sudden roar silenced whatever the Master would have said next. The Master whirled to see Chang standing over the ruins of the distillation chamber, a metal bar in his hand. The lattice of energy ended and the Doctor fell to the floor. He shook himself out of his daze and answered, ‘Smashing your machine, it looks like.’

The Master roared and pointed a tube at Chang, but the Doctor prised it from his hands as if he were taking it away from a child. The fingers crumbled away in the Doctor’s grasp. ‘No, Master. It is over. You spent too much energy on your rampage through London and in your battle with Weng-Chiang. You are at the end of your lives and not a moment too soon. With your death here, the timeline is restored. I don’t know if Weng-Chiang usurped your plan as you claim or if you saw something good and thought you can muscle in on it, but either way, it is over.’

The Master glared wordlessly at the Doctor, but his failing body could no longer contain his malice. It was crumbling around him, and even his enormous, inhuman will could no longer hold it together. He disintegrated in a final puff of melodrama and the universe was free of the menace of the Master.

Chang dropped the metal bar to the floor with a clatter. ‘Nice work,’ said the Doctor.

‘What happens now?’ Chang asked, but he never got his answer, for events transpired exactly as the Doctor had predicted. This pocket of time was overwritten instantly and completely. Magnus Greel would go on to menace London, and the Master would continue on his journey to the star system of Mettula Orionsis, home of the Traken union, where his plans to prolong his life would meet with greater success.

But that is a story for another time.

Time Signature

Andrew Blair

The Time Lords, craven dullards with brittle fingernails, eventually agreed to my terms.

Firstly: the tiny matter of entropy.

If I want to feel the ebb and flow and spark of my cells I have to concentrate now, for this body is teeming with life, with energy. I am Master of never, never dying.

Secondly: the issue of place.

I did not wish to stay on Gallifrey. Gallifrey did not wish to have me. And it was ever thus.

I have been deposited on the backwater planet where I left my TARDIS but not, on closer inspection, on the same continent. This will be retaliation for shooting Rassilon until he regenerated. Twice. L, as they say, O L.

So back to manual lasers for now with their many satisfying associated smells, and which are fine for subduing primitive races of invertebrates such as the ones I have enslaved here. I told them my name was Von Daniken, a joke which was wasted on this planet.

When I was Harold Saxon, I got trapped talking to a backbencher at a party conference. He was telling me he used to go on holiday to a British beach every year - which explained a lot about his personality – and how he and his friends used to go skimming stones. They thought that it might impress the locals. He remembered getting a stone to bounce six times only for the innkeeper's daughter to shrug and walk away. He demanded to know why. She said she saw city kids do this all the time. She said she didn't fancy people based on how well they could throw rocks. She said the assumption she would do really put her off.

He spent the rest of that night throwing rocks into the bodies of jellyfish stuck on the beach.

Anyway, that story came to mind when I was stuck on the planet. Strange what your mind brings up. In most timelines his wife suffocates him with a pillow then tells people he had a heart attack.

I unlock the TARDIS, disguised as two vast and trunkless legs of stone, expecting a sense of relief and joy from the old beast, but it stays dark and sulking. After four months training jellyfish to form a continental bridge I was hoping for a little gratitude.

I coax, I wheedle, I offer praise and affection, reminiscing about the old times to no avail. So I fire a laser at the portrait in the corner, smash the frame a bit, then use the flames and wood to make a torch. After holding this under the console for a bit, the lights slowly start to come on and the engines purr.

When I first stole it, this TARDIS was a state-of-the-art prototype, designed for covert trips by High Council members. Somewhat more luxurious than most, it had all passwords saved, all kinks catered for, and a separate amphitheatre for collar storage. Of course it was haughty. Cheeky even. I'm not going to pretend I wasn't into it. It was the kind of TARDIS that would smother its husband with a pillow.

It's got rather sedentary in its old age, but still has these short-lived moments of truculence. Fortunately I know its weak points.

I do like my TARDIS though. I'm kind to it. I keep it functional, topped up with zeiton, and it takes me where I want to go.

I send it out into the vortex looking for potential fuel sources and head for the Zero Room. It's exactly as I left it. Matt black walls, old mahogany furniture, heavy desks, cushioned chairs, and shelves piled high with notepads, monitors and interfaces. On the long wall on the right is a large corkboard covered in post-it notes, photographs, print-outs, bits of string stretched taut across coloured tacks. There are two plastic boxes full of cables that I refuse to throw out in case they turn out to be useful (time travellers never know what kind of USB port they'll encounter).

Next to the corkboard is a whiteboard connected to the telepathic circuits. There's a centimetre of dust on everything, motes pass through the beams from the currently red ceiling spotlights. I sweep aside the pile of primary-coloured binders and empty Poly Pockets on the desk by the far wall and sit down in a swivel chair set to someone else's height and arms. It's a universal-standard biped's office chair with claret-coloured fabric. The wine rack is empty.

It takes the screens in front of me about a minute to restore their previous information: these are where I follow various information sources – the Matrix, the Unexamined Mind Palace, the Platonic Abstract Propaganda Corporation, that sort of thing – with keyword searches. Things like 'scientific breakthrough', 'rumours of ancient evil', and, of course, my own name.

It's like poetry. You can be inspired by anything. Unlike poetry, it actually makes a tangible difference to the universe. I almost turned England into a person after reading *National Psychogeographic* and, more successfully, discovered Numismaton gas in a slightly more prosaic journal. In the Matrix it's

down as ‘a humiliating misstep’, syntax that reeks of utter gammon. A. I was fine, and B. Did you see the look on his face? It was so worth it.

In the bottom left corner of the room is a flipchart on an easel. In my old handwriting there are numerous words and phrases scribbled out – I think one says ‘Tharil genesplice?’ – but with ‘FOB WATCH’ underlined several times.

I see an old Tissue Compression Eliminator on the easel’s shelf – the one that looks like a sex toy – and I’m overcome with a wave of nostalgia. I forage under the desk and find the binder I’m looking for, the dinosaur-skin texture unmistakable.

I close my eyes, circle my finger around and find a page at random.

It’s the one where I dropped off a Weeping Angel at the Great Exhibition. Charlotte Bronte coped annoyingly well, I thought, Dickens less so. Marx kept asking to borrow money which I, naturally, agreed to do before immediately leaving. Small-scale scheming of course, but sometimes you just need to unwind.

I turn the pages. So many faces. So many memories. They wait in the mind for a prompt, and then the details rain down on you. Here’s me winning series 15 of *Ru Paul’s Drag Race*. Everyone hated me. My first and only lip-sync was in the final. When the fracking disaster happened I laughed and laughed and laughed.

I go over to the corkboard and examine the bits of string. The first layer is just straight lines arranged in a spiral, but the layers over that are complex with some strings splitting off in different directions and others looping around to reach different points. A map of the A413 has a string connecting it to a diagram of a police box, and a loop underneath both connecting it to a lengthy scroll full of equations.

Around the outside of this is, on different coloured paper, the security rota for Jodrell Bank, some pastel sketches of an old man in white cloak and hat (including fabric samples), and the installation instructions for a small pneumatic platform. Outside *that* is a bunch of yellow post-it notes with some hand scribbled notes, the top one of which reads ‘What to do if your creations turn against you’.

I know people grudgingly admit my genius but it’s usually things like ‘He projected a prediction of the Matrix into my mind’ or ‘He’s very good at maths’, but no one mentions how incredibly *thorough* I am. I came up with an entire civilisation as a backup plan for God’s sake.

I’ve started pacing along the rug’s worn patch. On the back of the door, facing me, is a poster I had made. It’s a valley on Gallifrey at sunset framed in black.

The top of the red slopes are covered in trees. Halfway up on one side is the cottage, the well, the path up the hill. If you know what you're looking for you can see the white stone wall that marked the end of the estate. Over this, in Castellan Condensed font (which was fashionable at the time), is the sentence: 'In many ways we have the same mind.'

The Doctor doesn't know where I am or what I'm doing. It's always me who has to reach out to him, of course, he never comes looking for me.

I have time and space now, to think, to act. So much of it. I can make such incredible plans, intricate puzzle box schemes of almost omniscient scope. I can plan outfits, buy domain names and make playlists. And I've got to think *big*. It's expected of me; I can't just get up to numerous low-level mischiefs and/or shenanigans, it has to be suitably epic. It's because the Doctor's so much more in himself these days, he only notices something massive.

So I need something huge. Something planet-shattering, something that he absolutely cannot undo. I was so close with the Mr Saxon scheme, but that had constraints. This time I have free reign, and no distractions – fun as it was, I can't allow myself to hunt down and gaslight the Lord Lyon's entire family (simply because they didn't laugh at my 'You're not even a real lion' joke). Time to get my head down and come up with my ultimate plot. My grand plan. My masterpiece.

The Dictaphone shatters against the Zero Room wall. I stalk over to the roundel it hit and notice a tiny dent where it impacted. I punch it and punch it and punch it, until my knuckles bleed and the sound of my hearts beating fills my head. I smile at the roundel, a crack forming, and then punch it again and again and again. Wiping the blood away with my sleeve, I see that the crack has expanded across the entire roundel. I punch it again.

So yes, I've got nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

It's been eight months.

About six weeks ago I thought I had something involving evil SatNav but then I checked and discovered this had already been done by the Sontarans. *Sontarans*. When I read that I did a little sick in my mind.

I did do some low-level malice at a major interplanetary conference just to keep myself sharp. I pretended to be Hercule Poirot while systematically

murdering the guests. The knock-on effects were colossal, the federation splintered and became unable to function, but my hearts weren't in it. I watched as populism took hold on Arcturus, Capua, Planet 7, the outer rim colonies... I visited Alpha Centauri, opened a door, lost several frequencies of hearing, and then left again. Such a lot of screaming. Distribution networks collapsed, famine took hold. Civil war erupted on Peladon. Billions died and I felt nothing.

It was just... this felt like something I'd scribbled down on the back of a napkin. A funny one, just to fill the time. One for the studio, not one for me. And it lacked the personal touch. Dominion is much more satisfying than death *en masse*. When the idea of you is enough to make someone shiver, their stomach clench, the fear fill them utterly... that's perfect. That's what I'm after. When millions of people were dying, starving and alone in the dark, not knowing the power I had over them... the idea of visiting them to explain was obviously tempting, but after the first few hundred it just became repetitive. Plus, the smell.

I can't sleep most nights. I've taken to trawling the sub-ether forums, Meme-Station and Wikipedia, link-hopping. It yields nothing in the way of plans, but I do enjoy correcting other people when they're wrong and also correcting other people when they're right. I know it's not helping, I know that this is just distracting me from my true purpose, but it's so addictive.

I'm pacing again; trying to clear my head but it's impossible. I try to focus on my footsteps, the feel of the carpet, my breathing... but I can't concentrate beyond the juddering rhythm. I can feel the turn of a planet, if I concentrate, so it doesn't take much to get distracted by the blood coursing around my body in response to my hearts. I'm alive. I win. Hah.

There's a ping as I get a keywords result. It's under the 'Event One + Doctor' search.

This seems unlikely. As I mentioned, I don't get credit for the way my plans escalate, but I am fundamentally an optimist. This result, though, isn't exactly what I was searching for.

Deep in the conspiracy theories section of the sub-ether forums, an anti-vaxxer has posted something about Lazar's disease, about how it just went away overnight. In the replies someone called lolvir69, who uses Garamond Bold for no obvious reason, recounts his experience with the disease.

It's while reading this a plan starts forming in my head.

It's when I get to the end of his post, and see a name I haven't considered in centuries, that this plan solidifies.

This is what was missing before.

I can feel the excitement building. I can see the different strands of possibility spiralling off from each other. My mind is racing. Oh yes! This is it. This is the one. The Doctor won't be able to stop me. In fact, he'll be obligated not to.

I laugh, and the room is full of echoes. I hear the same laugh from different voices. This is always my favourite part of the process, the rush of the new, the anticipation before the actual.

I breathe. I ground myself. I let it pass. It's time to act.

I've got a disease to catch.

Philosophers are the real evil of the universe. What I provide for people is a chance to see themselves in the grand scheme of things, and it's a potent truth. It liberates. It cleanses. Philosophy is a tether. And, I can't stress this enough, it's a tether designed by the most boring, boring people. However, ahah, I can't help but admire them on one level, because you have all these ethical theories people cling to but they're actually impossible to live by. It's a fantastic gift, and they've maintained the façade of meaning every word. Slow clap then, slow clap for philosophers (I met Immanuel Kant, once. After ten minutes listening to him I grabbed both his arms and started hitting him in the face with them, yelling that it was categorically imperative to do so. 'Stop hitting yourself Kant,' I shouted. 'But I cannot,' he said. 'For you are hitting me with my own hands.').

Occasionally philosophers ask questions about teleports. They ponder the idea that, as your molecules are effectively cut and pasted, you are painlessly killed at one end but a perfect copy is produced at the other, effectively a new creation.

This is based on the assumption that death is interesting or, in fact, some sort of challenge. A computer can create life, all it needs is the necessary information and hardware. The information is just sent from one computer to another, just like a text or Tiktok, and once all the failsafes have been satisfied the data is wiped from the hard drive. It's a boring process, taken for granted.

I arrived by teleport on Terminus, having been found staggering through Theseus' Spaceport in clear need of medical assistance. There was a sudden thrill of fear when the medics realised I had Lazar's. The younger one had heard of it, clearly, but the older man looked like he had lived through the worst of it. He sat down and visibly trembled.

I was given injections by a medical robot and placed on a bed, then transported to the ship for further examination. It tested my patience, frankly, and I took the

liberty of devising my own – much simpler – cure. I'm sure the Doctor would be impressed, once he'd finished saying 'I should have realised' and 'I'm so sorry' while feeling guilty for not synthesising one himself.

The systems realised that I had a potentially life-threatening case and carried out the cure. It seemed to involve a dose of radiation. It was such an old-fashioned rig, basically held together with string. Near obsolete hardware, cables everywhere, nothing wireless. It's so antiquated as to actually be a security feature. Hospital records can be very useful, but in this case mine will be forged. No one here must know what I am yet.

As I recuperated I was graced by a visit from an organic being. As people tend to react with at best confusion when a big talking dog reads their chart, most of the patients are visited by one Nyssa of Traken. Of course, she did not recognise me. She explained, as I imagine she did to every patient, that she was once in my position, but the survival rate has gone up since then. Until a vaccine is developed, though, this hospital will be needed.

'I am... a scientist,' I said. 'An immunologist, mainly. I was... working on—'

'You must rest,' she said. 'We can talk about this later.'

Later comes and goes. Time passes. I drum my fingers. I am ostensibly impatient.

'Hydromel,' I said one day. 'You're too reliant on Hydromel.'

Nyssa put down my chart and took off her glasses. I'm thinking thirty years have passed since she started working here. Trakenites aged more slowly than humans, but a combination of illness and stress meant each year showed. She was dressed in scrubs, but if you knew she was effectively royalty then it showed. She had an air of unfussy confidence about her.

'Do you have an alternative?' she asked. 'No one has managed to synthesise it yet.'

'I was close.'

She looked at my chart again. I've given myself better readings, but not such an improvement as to be suspicious.

'You still need to rest,' she said, ever cautious. 'But tomorrow we will talk more.'

Acting. That's another thing I don't get complimented on enough. Part of my Mr Saxon backstory was that I was in the Gilbert & Sullivan society at university,

and there is not a part I couldn't have played in those shows. At the Academy my drama teacher told me I could wring pathos from even classical comedies, even under all the prosthetics.

Obviously making a vaccine requires skill too, but pretending to discover one you've already invented to an expert whose father's body you stole before wiping out her entire planet... there isn't an awards body in the universe wouldn't give me a statue for this performance.

Possibly shouldn't mention statues here though, probably still a sore point.

'You gave yourself Lazar's?' she was asking.

'Not something you can ask someone else to do,' I said.

'You could have asked us.'

'No one would give me your contact details, this is still a plague ship. Ah!'

'Have you found something?'

Like I said. Acting.

The vaccine worked as I knew it would. No tricks either, I needed to make sure I was trusted. You should really know that my plans would never be that simple.

I took great delight in gaining Nyssa's trust. I had a backstory designed to elicit strong emotional responses from her. My father, you see, had died of Lazar's disease. I didn't process the grief, I told her, simply threw myself into my work.

I drip-fed information, so as not to appear suspicious. Yes, I was a polymath. Yes, I was one of those do-gooder eunuchy types who went around being nice to people and then looked sad when people weren't nice back. I pretended to be the Doctor, basically. Oh and I wanted to be a vet when I was young.

Nyssa told me about her childhood. She had wanted to be a Consul. To follow in her father's footsteps. She hadn't had any ambitions outside of her family, but then she lost them. Instead she found the universe. I asked her how she found it, light heartedly. She said it was a battleground. There was intellect, she said, and romance. But also there was brute force and cynicism. She felt increasingly like the latter two were winning.

I had to make a conscious effort not to roll my eyes.

'So when people like you turn up,' she said, 'it's such a relief. It feels like the tide might be turning.'

'You know,' she added, 'you remind me of my father.'

I kept my face straight. Just. I asked her what had happened to him she just said 'He died'.

'That's so sad.'

‘It is,’ she said, ‘but first he lived.’

I got back to my quarters just in time. I must have laughed for about ten minutes. Look, actual tears.

‘The big dog says this ship can travel in time’, I said a few weeks later.

‘He’s called the Garm, as well you know.’

‘Is it true? Is time travel actually, y’know, a thing? A thing we could do?’

‘I... I don’t know.’

‘Oh.’

‘If the Doctor were here...’

‘Who?’ I asked. I couldn’t help it. The synapses fired before I could stop them. Old habits. At some level I always want to hear what people think about him.

She gushed, of course. They often do. I kept my fists clenched behind my back. When she said he was a man looking for peace in a universe on fire, I thought about what I’d seen him do; I believe he sent them back to die: Rassilon, the Visionary, the Woman... he’s the man who folded Andromeda. Who made the Cruciform. Who imprisoned the Mara in his own mind.

I said ‘He sounds wonderful.’

‘Why are we heading this way?’

‘You’ll see.’

I was taking Nyssa to the cockpit, which I had visited several times over the last few weeks. The specifications were correct and the adjustments incredibly simple to administer, and I let my excitement bleed through into my performance.

‘Have you done something?’

‘Maybe.’

The door to the cockpit slid open, revealing the first part of my surprise. I turned to see her face. A smile, yes, but also questions.

‘Where did you get flowers?’ she said.

‘And chocolates.’

‘And chocolates.’

‘I’m very clever.’

‘Harold–’

‘Yes?’

Yeah, still got it.

‘Harold, this is surprisingly sweet–’

‘Thank you.’

‘But I’m actually–’

‘And I fixed the temporal circuits.’

She stared at me.

‘I mean, I think I have. I haven’t tested them yet.’

‘You fixed... a time machine?’

‘I fixed a time machine,’ I grinned. ‘Well, probably.’

Nyssa walked over to the ship’s main terminal, and examined the readouts.

‘And you fixed the lightspeed overdrive?’

‘I dabble.’

She turned and looked at me, her brow furrowed, her lips moving slightly.

‘Why?’ she said eventually.

I blushed on cue. Actor. Just saying.

‘Well, it’s... there aren’t any more patients here.’

‘Thanks to you.’

‘And you. You stuck it out, I just swanned in at the last minute and stole all the glory. And anyway, I thought... you deserve a holiday.’

I flashed her my most charming smile.

‘So, I know it’s quite a big question,’ I continued, ‘But we could feasibly travel almost anywhere in time and space, so... is there anywhere you’d like to go?’

‘Brisbane,’ she said quickly, then held a hand up to her mouth as if trying to cram the word back in.

‘Brisbane?’ I said, genuinely unimpressed.

‘...yes,’ she said. ‘Around Earth year... 2010.’

‘AD,’ she added.

‘Brisbane?’ I repeated.

‘Yes please,’ she said. ‘There’s... there’s someone I want to see.’

I did not, I admit, expect this.

‘Okay,’ I said eventually. ‘Let’s go to Brisbane.’

Tegan Jovanka awoke on January the 1st, 2011 AD to find a massive space hospital in her back garden. Fortunately her house was out near Cedar Creek rather than in the city itself, or else a lot of people would have been crushed to death. As it was the casualties were animals and trees.

When the noise woke her up, she groggily got out of bed and opened the curtain. Then she sighed. Then she laughed.

‘Why now?’ she said to herself, ‘Why would you come back when I’m this hungover?’

You might be wondering why I haven’t simply killed her. Obviously the thought has crossed my mind on many occasions, but there is a sense of inelegance. A lack of utility, I suppose. I need the ship, mainly, but Nyssa of Traken’s presence allows me to leave a calling card, a message to the Doctor. If I simply killed her then he might become angry, and he’s so *dull* when that happens. Also, as discussed, death is boring. If life is, as she put it, a battlefield, then it’s much crueller to prolong it than to end it. Time to crush any last hopes for romance and cynicism.

Unfortunately we have come here, rather than following the Doctor as I expected. Nyssa and that awful air hostess woman are, after all the initial hugging, just talking. So much talking. It goes on and on. I mute the scanner after a while until I see them both looking up at me, and turn the sound back on.

‘Who’s the pilot? I hear the Australian say.

‘Oh, sorry—’

‘Is it... him?’

‘The Doctor? No, sorry.’

‘I thought it was him at first. The hair’s kinda similar.’

‘Harold?’ calls Nyssa, ‘Come and meet my friend Tegan.’

‘Harold?’ asks Tegan.

‘We’ve met.’

Here we. Here we. Here we—

‘Have we?’ Tegan shouts. She thinks she has to shout for me to hear in the ship. The Doctor sure does pick them. Fortunately I can stop that without lowering myself to their level. A hologram appears just behind them.

‘Oh yes,’ I say, making them jump. ‘Do people still talk about me nowadays?’

Tegan recognises me, in a way.

‘You?’ she says. ‘You died!’

‘Ohh no?’ I said. ‘Did I?’

‘Harold, what’s going on?’ asks Nyssa.

‘Harold Saxon was the Prime Minister. Of Britain,’ said Tegan, ‘There was something... there were aliens. He disappeared; some people said he got shot... the Doctor was there.’

‘It was... a lot,’ she added.

‘I see,’ said Nyssa. ‘Harold, who are you?’

‘Fun as it would be to...’ I yawned. ‘...stay and listen to your inane babble-babble, I actually have pressing business to attend to.’

‘What are you? Fifteen?’ said Tegan.

‘Depends who you listen to. But like I said: Me: go now. You: stay here. Have sad little lives.’

‘Sad little life? Mate, you had space leprosy.’

‘Yes, and I cured it. But will anyone mention that at my funeral? No, I’m sure all the do-gooders and self-appointed moral crusaders won’t want any shades of grey.’

‘Well there’s a red flag.’

‘You’re a red flag.’

‘Nyssa, was he this big a prick on the spaceship?’

I had forgotten how annoying Miss Jovanka is.

While we’ve been speaking, Nyssa’s just been looking up, her face barely moving. She’s holding it together better than I expected, but I know how to burst the dam.

‘Nyssa, this is the first person you thought of when I offered you time travel? This foul-mouthed imbecile with a dead aunt? What would your father say?’

There. There’s the lip wobbling.

‘Oh wait, I know!’

‘I know exactly what he’d say.

Leave the pause, just long enough to bring the dread to the surface. Let them think it before I confirm:

‘I am the Master,’ I say and then engage the time drives.

Before the ship dematerialises, I saw her lips move. She said simply, ‘I know’.

I now have a ship with no patients on board. Just me, a faster than light drive and

a time machine. Nyssa seems to have worked out who I was, which is niggling somewhat. To the idiot or simpleton, this may look like I've made a net loss, given that I already have access to a space/time machine.

But what I didn't have in there was a specific teleport.

A teleport that had reconstituted an infected version of me.

Oh, what's that? It gets wiped? Normally yes, but as I've been telling you I am so clever. And oh look, someone clever made *another* virus. Whoops! And yes, the hardware on this ship is so old, it has a very specific interface (thank you for noticing), but someone else *incredibly clever* has kept hold of every kind of USB plug imaginable, so that is also not a problem.

I think you'll find that I'm quite capable of heading to the teleport and making a copy of myself. Why not? I haven't had a new thing in a while, so what the hell. And why stop at one? Why not make an army of Masters (yes!) not only deadly in their own right but also highly infectious. Oh sure, there's a vaccine *now*, but there isn't one *then*. Did I mention I brought a time ship?

I even – damn my thoroughness – did a test run on Peladon before coming here. This time it was immensely satisfying. This time they knew exactly who was responsible. As they will now.

Why look, on the scanner. It's a small blue-green planet.

No, not that one. The other one.

I take a new Dictaphone out of my pocket, and press record:

'Well. *Hello* everyone.

You are really gonna want to pay attention to *this*.'

Your New Webmaster

Paul Driscoll

‘Come on, Doctor, don’t be shy!’

‘Shy? That’s not it, Rose,’ complained the Doctor.

Rose took great pleasure in dragging the Doctor out of the TARDIS. She surveyed the usually unremarkable suburban street she’d railroaded him into visiting. Not much to note, other than how dirty the place looked. Since when did the posh folk leave their half-eaten pizza on the floor? At least it wasn’t a black bin day this time.

The Doctor grimaced like a child as she tried to make him look presentable.

‘Let’s hope we didn’t land on top of the delivery boy,’ he said.

‘You’re not funny. So why the resistance, eh? You prefer to be all mysterious, is that it?’ Rose looked at the Doctor square on, trying to gauge his reaction as she straightened his jacket. ‘It is, isn’t it? Oh my god. I hate to break it to you, Doctor, but the Milk Tray man just doesn’t cut it anymore. These days we like our men to be uncomplicated, up front... not afraid to wear their hearts on their sleeves.’

‘You’re not introducing me to a potential date, Rose.’

‘Of course not, I’m keeping you all to myself. But you’re about to meet your biggest fan, so you’ll want to be looking your best. I mean, if he wasn’t married...’

The Doctor feigned his biggest grin yet.

‘Happy now? Because I’m not.’

‘That’s better,’ laughed Rose.

‘Let’s just get it over with. The universe is waiting for us, remember.’

The banter was fun as always, but Rose sensed genuine unease in the Doctor.

‘For me, Doctor. Do it for me. I felt sorry for the guy. I can’t bear the thought of him not knowing. I want to travel with you light, with no distractions or regrets.’

‘Funny that. You had no trouble leaving mummy behind without even so much as a note.’

‘That’s different and you know it, I could spend a lifetime with you and you could just roll back time and drop me back home for tea. It would be like I’d just popped out for a pint of milk. Where’s your mum anyway? Come to think of it, do Time Lords even have mums? I mean that’s what you are, isn’t it... a Time

Lord. At least, that's what that blobby Pokémon monster called you.'

'Ask this Clive fellow of yours... if he's such an expert...'

The damning words of the editor of the Daily Herald were still taunting Murray French as he arrived back at his dingy and sparse flat on the Powell Estate.

'Worthless, I can get better pictures from a kiddies' camera, taken from the back of the crowd. Stop wasting my time and yours and go and find a proper job.'

Another rejection from the papers. Another week on the dole. Of course it was. Murray French's efforts to get up close and personal with the stars, to sell that killer front page photo, had so far been an unmitigated disaster. At this rate he couldn't even capture his five year old son blowing out his birthday candles without screwing it up. Not that his ex-wife would have sent him a party invite.

Last week he had been in the right place at the right time for once, camera to hand just in case. No A list, B list, or any list celebrity had turned up, but he had watched a man die outside Queens Arcade at the hands of some demon-possessed shop mannequins. And what did he have to show for it? A close-up of a wet and dark street, the best he could muster while running for his life. He'd immediately gone home and searched through his portfolio again. His biggest prize was still that blurry old shot of the back of Freddie Mercury's head, taken some twenty years ago. He'd still be trying to flog it in his seventies.

Depressed, he went straight to the fridge, only to discover that the beer had run out. He'd have to settle for that last half a glass of vinegary out-of-date wine. Could this day get any worse? Yes, he reminded himself, it could. He still hadn't opened the post.

He stared at the thick brown envelope waiting for him on the coffee table. More guff from the divorce and custody proceedings, no doubt. Deciding that he deserved maximum punishment for his failures that day, he opened it and shook out the contents. A bunch of photographs fell out face down, probably all of him in compromising positions, he thought. He shuffled them into a neat pile and prepared for the worst. Squeezing the wine glass in stressed anticipation, he turned the first one over.

'What in God's name?'

He instantly relaxed his grip and dropped the glass in a state of utter bewilderment at what he had just seen. After a brief moment of stunned silence,

Murray sprang into action.

Thankfully, the spilt wine had just missed the photos, but before he could examine the unsolicited collection in more detail, or even dare handle them again, the table needed a good polish and his hands an even better wash.

Either someone was taking the piss, or he was about to get very rich indeed.

Mickey Smith had gone into hiding. Jackie Tyler knew she could be frightening at the best of times, but for the last few weeks she'd been on his case, desperate to find out what had happened to Rose. She'd been acting like a complete monster, hounding him like a demented and shameless stalker. She wouldn't be surprised if his ears never recovered from all the twisting, and after a particularly unpleasant incident with a corkscrew she'd left him with the distinct impression that nothing would be off-limits to her.

The last time she saw him, however, she'd come to his flat to warn him to lie low. Another girl had gone missing from the estate, and although the parents were convinced the local oddball photographer was responsible, they'd soon be knocking at Mickey's door if she didn't come home. He was bound to become the prime suspect, what with all the rumours about Rose, and if he thought *she* was scary...

It had been an awkward meeting, but by the end of it Jackie was convinced she'd been wrong about Mickey. He was clearly as traumatised as she was, although his paranoia about the police wasn't helping his cause. For instance, she'd asked him to take down the handwritten 'have you seen' posters that had been plastered around the estate. The official ones were out now and they had a much better image of Rose on them. But he denied they were his, telling her that if he had designed them, he sure as hell wouldn't be directing people to go to the police if they had any information. Then he'd started talking nonsense about conspiracies involving disappearing police boxes, hungry dustbins, and fake aliens. He was even refusing to believe that the killer shop dummies were Al Qaeda weapons.

Jackie promised Mickey she would feed his fish while he was away, keep an eye on his car because it was far too distinctive to go unnoticed, and try and convince the vigilantes they were targeting the wrong man. She'd call him when it was safe to return.

As soon as he'd made his moonlight flit, Jackie started snooping through

Mickey's belongings. She discovered he'd been carrying out his own investigation into Rose's disappearance and it looked like he had a suspect of his own – Clive Finch of Victoria Street.

She was round there like a shot.

Caroline Finch pulled no punches when Jackie knocked on the door asking to see her husband. This wasn't the first alien hunter to have come calling since the life-destroying incident at the shopping mall, and by now she had perfected her response.

'He's dead. And so will you be if you don't leave right now.'

'I'm sorry, I had no...'

'Wait...' said Caroline. 'Haven't I seen you before?'

Jackie shrugged. 'I don't think so.'

'You were on the news, that's it, doing an appeal. You're Rose Tyler's mother! Wait there...'

Looking flustered, Caroline returned dragging a cardboard box through the hallway with her. She started trawling through it, casting various papers and photographs aside until she found the grainy security camera still she was looking for.

'There!' she shouted triumphantly. 'That's her, isn't it, in the window of the pizza bar.'

'My Rose... with her boyfriend Mickey... they look so happy together, what was I thinking,' said Jackie, overcome with emotion. 'But what are you doing with this?'

'One of Clive's 'who is the Doctor' fanatics posted it through the door anonymously.' Caroline pointed at the waiter in the photograph. 'That's him, isn't it? That's the Doctor – the man who killed my Clive.'

'I don't know about any killings, but yeah that's the Doctor. What the hell is he doing there, you don't think--'

'Find the Doctor and you'll find your daughter. I only hope it's not too late. I once met your Rose. She came here shortly before Clive... I remember thinking that it made such a change to see a girl into all that stuff, but now I see where she gets it from.'

'I'm not a fanatic,' insisted Jackie. 'I'm just a mother going out of her mind. Your husband's name came up when I was looking for my daughter. Why

haven't you handed this in to the police? This is important evidence ... Oh I get it, you think the Doctor's working for them, don't you? That's why Mickey wanted to talk to your Clive, he didn't trust the police either.'

'Working for the police? Now you're sounding like Clive. I love him to bits, but that way lies madness. The Doctor's a conman, a dangerous conman – that's all. I mean, his name tells you everything. Who would call themselves the Doctor?'

'I can tell you're from the suburbs, it wouldn't sound strange on my estate. It can't be him, he seemed like such a nice man, but if you are right we have to unmask him... expose his lies...'

'Be careful Jackie. Clive was right about one thing. Death is never far behind the Doctor. Look, why don't I put the kettle on? I want to know everything, Jackie. Everything.'

'Me too, Mrs Finch, me too.'

Two doors down from the Finch's, the Doctor did an abrupt turn and headed back to the TARDIS.

'Oh no, you don't,' said Rose.

'Oh yes, I do.'

Rose rolled her eyes and folded her arms.

'Well, you're on your own, then,' she shouted, calling his bluff.

'Okay. Nice to have met you, Rose Tyler. Run for your sad life.'

'Alright then. I will. It was a bit weird hooking up with a lonely old man, anyway. I don't know what I was thinking.'

The Doctor carried on walking, resisting the urge to turn back.

'Nobody outbluffs me,' he muttered to himself.

'Any second now,' said Rose hopefully.

The sound of the TARDIS dematerialising shook her into action. She bolted back and banged on the disappearing door.

'All right, all right,' she said. 'You win.'

The TARDIS solidified and the Doctor popped his head out of the door.

'One day you'll learn, Rose Tyler, that as far as your universe is concerned, nobody wins. Not ever. Have a nice life!'

And with that, he was off again.

Living on the Powell Estate and having a nice life was an impossible mix. At least it was according to Murray French, who constantly blamed his string of disasters on the wretched place. But if the package he'd opened was genuine, it was his ticket out of there. He could finally take away the deliberate irony in his childhood nickname, Murray Mint. Just maybe, he would have the last laugh.

'Mr French, you don't know me. Nobody knows me and that is how it must stay, but I am leaving these images with you as I have every confidence you will put them to good use. Please accept them with my compliments and have a nice life.'

Murray had reread the note that accompanied the stash of headline-worthy photographs at least thirty times. It was still sounding too good to be true, but he had nothing to lose in trying to sell them.

Might as well start to live like a king, he'd decided as he headed to the local cafe for bagels and fresh coffee. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had breakfast, let alone eat out. He wanted to be at his best when returning unannounced to the offices of the Daily Herald. Just how far will that editor's face drop on seeing the new photographs?

The local CSO, Pratt by name and prat by nature, was out and about and immediately made a beeline for him. Of course he did.

'Bit early for you, isn't it Murray?'

'Since when was that a crime, eh?'

'Who said anything about crime? But while you're here, there is something we'd like to ask you about.'

Here we go, thought Murray, sick to the back teeth of being victimised by the would-be police officer.

'I'm not on the take, if that's what you mean.'

'It's not groceries that have been taken this time. Have you seen this girl?' said Pratt, flashing a passport sized photograph of a worse-for-wear blonde.

'That's Suzie Beamish, from number 9. What's happened to her?'

'We were hoping you'd be able to tell us. She's missing, her parents are going out of their minds.'

'Now listen, pal... I'm gonna sue you for harassment. It's probably the same guy who kidnapped that Rose girl. Anyway, why are you playing detective?'

You're not a real police officer, shouldn't you be harassing the kids on the 'no ball games' green?'

'Oh, don't you worry, Mr French. CID will be all over this if she doesn't come home soon. And your name will be the first in the frame. I'm doing you a favour here, giving you the chance to rule yourself out of their enquiries from the start.'

'Trying to be the local hero, more like. Look, I took a few photographs, that's all. I wasn't harming anyone. I was practicing. Anyway, that was over a year ago now and I was released without charge.'

'Photographs of your neighbours going about their business inside their houses. An invasion of privacy at the very least. But they weren't all exactly harmless, were they?'

'How was I to know she was about to take her top off?'

'What's that you're carrying?' said Pratt, pointing suspiciously at the brown envelope.

'Nude photographs of Suzie Beamish.'

'You're not funny. You're pathetic, scum of the earth.'

Murray smiled smugly.

'Want to take a look?'

Pratt snarled at him as without waiting for an answer, Murray took out a photograph.

'How the hell did you get that?' said Pratt. 'Is that...?'

'The Queen in her bathroom at Windsor Castle,' nodded Murray. 'You see, officer, I've got bigger fish to fry these days. I don't need to capture on camera the sorry lives of these losers anymore.'

'Who the hell is that?' said Pratt, pointing to the reflection in the bathroom mirror of a man wearing a black leather jacket.

'No idea. Exciting, isn't it? Now, if you don't mind, I'm off to get my breakfast.'

Rose Tyler was kicking herself for being so demanding on the Doctor. She had clearly overestimated how much he wanted her to travel with him, and underestimated how far he wanted to keep his identity secret. Clive had to know the truth, but she could have waited until after she'd been on a few adventures in the TARDIS.

She thought about still knocking on Clive's door, but it wouldn't be quite the

same as getting him to meet the Doctor in person. Besides, she was so mad at the Time Lord for ditching her, she almost wished she had made the whole thing up.

She was on the bus back to the Powell Estate, still working out what to tell her Mum about where she'd been for the last few weeks, when a suave looking, James Bond villain type, sat next to her.

'Terrible business,' he said, reading the evening paper.

'Yeah, whatever, mate,' muttered Rose. She turned to face the window.

'Have a heart, dear girl. That poor family turned off the life support, one whole week after their boy sustained his injuries in the explosion at the precinct. The thirty-first victim of the terror attack. Better that he died instantly, like Clive Finch and the others.'

'What did you just say?'

Rose grabbed the paper from the stranger, and looked at the centrespread of all the victims.

'Oh god, not Clive,' she said, spotting Clive in the roll call. 'Why did it have to be you?'

'You knew him too?'

'Sort of,' said Rose. Suddenly, she took an interest in the bearded stranger. 'Wait, you're not one of his...'

'His?'

'Doctor hunters... you know, Who is Doctor Who dot.com?'

'I'm always on the lookout for a Doctor. We're two of a kind, you see. Let me introduce myself – I am Doctor Magister, I specialise in psychotherapy. Mrs Finch is one of my patients.'

The stranger gave a disarming, you-can-trust-me kind of smile. 'I take it the website is how you came to be associated with Clive Finch?'

'I've seen him,' said Rose. 'I've seen the Doctor, the man he spent years researching. Clive died before I got the chance to tell him that it was all true.'

There he goes again, that smile...

'Real or not, the Doctor has caused much heartache,' he said, almost overly sympathetic. 'I'm sensing he's hurt you too.'

'Well he... no, no. He was kind. Broken, but kind. The Doctor is a good man, it's not his fault I messed it up.'

'Hmmm. Well, if ever you need to talk.' Magister handed Rose a business card. 'If you one day realise that this Doctor has left you feeling undervalued, bored with your life, or worse still if he starts to haunt you in your sleep, then call me. I can help. You certainly wouldn't be the first.'

Not another word was exchanged between them, not until they both stood up to get off at the Powell Estate stop.

‘We don’t get your sort living here, mate,’ said Rose as the bus pulled up.

‘I’m visiting a client,’ said Magister.

‘On the bus?’

‘Well, the last time I parked my car here, it was goodbye alloy wheels.’

‘I can believe that. I’d tuck that silk handkerchief inside your pocket if I were you.’

Further down the street, Murray French was running towards the bus stop.

‘Another human running for his life,’ observed Magister as the two of them stepped off the bus.

‘Tell the driver to wait!’ shouted Murray, frantically waving the brown envelope that he hoped was about to change his life.

The exchange of information between Jackie and Caroline was hardly a fair one. Whereas Jackie knew absolutely nothing about the Doctor, the stacks of files that Clive Finch had compiled on Rose’s possible abductor at least gave her something to follow up. It had taken over an hour to sift through it all. There was an unhealthy dose of confirmation bias, much of it based on grainy photos that either bore only a passing resemblance to the Doctor, or looked to have been photoshopped, but Jackie had been left with one realistic lead.

The Doctor had apparently been under the employ of the British wing of a top secret United Nations funded military organisation. The police... the army – it was possible they were all in this together. The more she dug, the more Mickey’s fears seemed justified, even though at no point had he ever put the Doctor himself in the frame. Looking back now though, whenever she’d mentioned the Doctor’s name, Mickey had tried to change the subject, as if he couldn’t bear to talk about him.

‘The Doctor was there that night, wasn’t he... the night my Clive died?’ said Caroline after Jackie had said her goodbyes. ‘That’s why Clive was so eager to take us to the precinct. He hated shopping, I knew he must have had an ulterior motive. Did your Rose tip my husband off?’

‘I can’t answer that, Mrs Finch, but I give you my word – I’m going to find the Doctor. Can I take some of these documents?’

‘I’m sick of the sight of them. You can have the lot. But I shut down the

website as soon as this became the hunt for a killer. I'd rather you didn't start it up again, because if he's looking for his next victim...'

Jackie had to believe that Caroline's hatred for the Doctor was the grief talking, otherwise the prospects of finding Rose alive were dire.

'I'm no fan of the Doctor's, but he isn't Clive's killer. It was those *things*, you said so yourself.'

Caroline smiled at Jackie sympathetically. She knew exactly why she was sounding so adamant.

'Clive always said that if he ever found the Doctor, he'd probably end up six feet under. I laughed it off at first, but then I tried to use his own words to get him to stop. It took over his life. I never believed for a minute that his fears were justified. The Doctor might not have pulled the trigger, but we wouldn't have been there if he wasn't involved, and those *things* probably wouldn't have either.'

'Unless we find him, we'll never know for sure,' said Jackie. 'Rose isn't stupid, she's a better judge of character than I am. She wouldn't bring a terrorist into our home, let alone run off with one.'

'If you're not careful the search will take over your life and get you nowhere. But I know someone who can help. He'll tell you to let it go, but ignore that bit and you'll find his therapy really helpful. Thursday at eight o'clock – come to St John's parish church. You see, it's not just us. My therapist, Doctor Magister, runs a group class for victims of the Doctor.'

'There are others?'

'A handful, but you mark my words, this is just the tip of the iceberg.'

It might be wishful thinking, but none of this was adding up for Jackie. Perhaps Caroline had become as paranoid as her husband. Grief could certainly do that to a person. She could remember hating the fact she was turning into Pete in the first months after his accident. The more she acted and sounded like him, the more she was losing herself. It made sense because she wished so much it was her, not him. He'd have made a better job of bringing up Rose. She would never have run away from him. At least Caroline had some support... the only way she had been able to access therapy was with a corkscrew.

'How come you're getting therapy already?'

'It's not a new thing. I've been seeing him for a year. I wanted him to talk to Clive about how to manage his obsession, but Clive refused to come along. Not when I'm so close, he'd say, not when I'm finally getting somewhere. This last year he was suddenly inundated with fresh leads. He said it was like the heydays

of the 1980s all over again, the end of a fifteen year drought.'

'But you carried on seeing this therapist?'

'To learn from the experiences of others. I might not have been able to change my husband, but I could try and understand him better. But above all, because Doctor Magister made me feel good about myself. He's a wonderful man.'

Rose still couldn't face going back to her mum, not that she had anywhere else to go. She'd tried Mickey's flat, but he wasn't there. Probably having a whale of time watching footie with his mates and drowning his sorrows in the local. He was sweet and she missed him, but by god he was needy. The silly sod had left his car unlocked, though, something that Magister fella would have found incomprehensible given his low opinion of the estate.

She loved that crazy yellow Beetle. It set her man apart from the crowd and made him look ridiculous. She liked it when he looked ridiculous. That was one thing he had over the Doctor, no way would Mr Northern Cool drive a sunflower yellow car. Yes, he was still her Mickey. She sat inside the car and laughed at the memories as she looked through his cassettes and twiddled the Smurfette air freshener. Feeling a little better about being back on the estate, she popped out for some chips and a can of Coke and returned to eat them in the car.

'I had a yellow car once.'

Rose nearly had a heart attack when the Doctor peered over from the back seat and helped himself to a chip.

'Oh my God, how long have you been sat there?' said Rose, before whacking him repeatedly with the bag of chips.

'Where is Ricky, anyway?'

'It's Mickey and you left me.'

'I think, Rose Tyler, you're the one who left. Anyway, I'm back now, okay?'

'Okay? Nothing about this, about us, is okay.'

'What's wrong?'

'Clive Finch was killed at the precinct. I nearly made a right fool of myself.'

To Rose's surprise, the Doctor's eyes lit up for a second, as if this was a good thing.

'I told you not to visit. You didn't, did you?' he said.

'What do you take me for? Of course not. You could at least try sound a little upset. You've just lost one of your biggest fans. I mean, he was scared of you,

thought you were some kind of bad omen, but he got a kick out of it.'

'It's for the best. He was a security risk. I don't want fans snooping into my affairs and finding out who I really am. It's not good for me or them.'

'So why were you so eager for me to come travelling with you?'

'You're different, Rose Tyler. I know you'll pull me up when I get it wrong. You'll love and hate me in equal measure. Like you're doing now. So, you coming, or what?'

Rose glanced across the estate at the block where her mum was probably still ringing round all her mates for news.

The Doctor now knew exactly why she was hesitating.

'She left Ricky boy a note,' he said, piecing together on his lap some scraps of paper he'd found under the seat. 'Wants to put a ring on his neck, why would anyone do that?'

Rose leaned over to read it. Her Mum's spelling was never the best.

'I'll ring your neck if my Rose is hurt'. It means she wants to kill him.'

'Oh.'

'Must think he knows where I am. That explains why he's not here, probably gone into hiding.'

'Hiding from a hiding. So come on, are you coming or not?'

'How can I now? I ought to make sure Mum and Mickey are okay.'

'Fair enough. I mean, I can't return you a few hours after we first left anymore. It's not easy, or advisable, to start crossing timelines you are already part of. But when we're done I can bring you back on this day. You can save Mickey's life before it's too late – and stop your mother going to jail. You'll only have around two million seconds to account for.'

'She's not literally going to kill him!'

'What a waste of a good analogy,' replied the Doctor sounding genuinely disappointed.

Rose weighed up her options. A few weeks of her mum going spare was recoverable. It wouldn't have been the first time she'd moved out for a short break. 'Okay, let's do this. You're obviously going to need my help to stop others getting killed like Clive.'

'Fantastic!'

The Doctor wriggled his way out of the car and opened the driver's door for Rose. Acting like he thought of himself as a true gentleman, he took her hand.

'You were joking before, weren't you?' said Rose following the Doctor down an alleyway back to the TARDIS.

‘Joking?’

‘About the yellow car?’

‘Bessie? Of course, not.’

‘You had a yellow car and you named it Bessie? Yeah – sure you did, Doctor. Blue is much more your colour.’

He’d finally done it. Murray French had sold his first photograph, the lot of them in fact, and he was about to become a very rich man.

With a crate of Guinness to celebrate, he returned to his soon to be ex-council flat.

Something was blocking the door from the inside. As he struggled to push it open, a voice called up from the street below.

‘Where is she, French? Where is my daughter?’

‘I have no idea, Mr Beamish. Maybe you should look closer to home,’ Murray shouted.

‘That’s it, if the police won’t help...’

The distraught father started to wave a hammer at him like a man possessed.

Murray took a quick snap of the hammer-wielding lunatic, partly to use as evidence in case he needed to lodge a complaint, but also to wind him up even more. The door still wouldn’t budge, but thankfully someone had come up to Beamish and was trying to calm him down. To his surprise he recognised the stranger as the man who had held up the bus for him earlier that day.

‘What are you, my guardian angel?’ Murray whispered to himself.

‘Mr Beamish, this isn’t the answer.’

‘And who the hell are you?’

‘You will give me the hammer.’

The transformation was instant. Beamish relented and passively handed over the weapon.

‘Good decision. In any case, it wasn’t him.’

‘Are you a detective? Have you found my daughter? Tell me you’ve found our little girl...’

Magister flashed an ID card. ‘Victim support. We have a new line of enquiry

we are following. We think we are close. Have you seen a newcomer on the estate recently by any chance? Wearing a black leather jacket?’

Murray looked over his shoulder as the stranger ushered Beamish back to his house. Finally he managed to push the door open just enough to squeeze through it.

The twenty-two photographs of the rich and famous Murray had sold to the paper that morning were already going to make him enough money to move off the estate, but now his hallway was like a treasure trove. No wonder the door wouldn’t open – there must have been thousands in this latest batch. Enough to make him a millionaire several times over.

What made the collection all the more remarkable was that the leather jacketed man appeared in every single image, sometimes front of stage, but mostly lurking in the background. Nobody could have been in so many places in one lifetime, let alone at all the major news events of the last twenty years, and with almost any celebrity you could name.

‘Who are you?’ said Murray, singling out a photograph of the man switching jackets with David Hasselhoff while the pair sat on top of an unfamiliar section of the Berlin Wall that had been graffitied with the words *Schlechter Wolf*. ‘This better not be a hoax, or I’m done for.’

That Thursday, Jackie came to the support group with Caroline. She’d had an awful week. When she’d fetched Mickey’s car to pick up all of the files at the Finch’s house, she could have sworn it had smelt of Rose’s perfume. Hell, her bum print was still on the passenger seat, how had she not noticed that before? And what was with all the chips? She assumed she was starting to go mad, just as Caroline had warned her, but it was happening sooner than expected.

Worse was to come. Much worse. Some chancer from the estate had sent her a blackmail letter claiming ‘I know what you did.’ Ordinarily Jackie would have gone straight to the police, but she had a horrible feeling that if they were as bent as Mickey was making out, they might even come for her.

Also in the post was a letter purporting to be from Rose. Apparently she was fine, just taking some time out at a mate’s. But Jackie wasn’t having any of it –

the spelling was even worse than hers and Rose was always pulling her up about it. She wouldn't be surprised if Mickey had forged it, either to make her feel better or to stop her from launching another attack on him.

Sod Mickey's fish, Jackie had to get off the estate. Thankfully, Caroline Finch had offered Clive's shed as a temporary hideout until things settled down. There was one catch though, she could stay on the condition that she came with Caroline to the support group.

'This is a bad idea,' said Jackie as they approached the church. 'I don't know who I can trust. I haven't felt comfortable showing my face since the appeal. Who knows how many others are secretly thinking I did it. That I killed my Rose.'

'You'll be among friends here, Jackie. We all know who is really responsible.'

Doctor Magister oozed charm when he greeted them at the door, but Jackie sensed an unnerving, almost sinister undercurrent.

'A new member, Mrs Finch? How marvellous.'

'This is Jackie Tyler, her daughter has been missing for weeks, and we know the Doctor was stalking her.'

'Excellent.'

'Excellent? Are you for real?' said Jackie.

'Oh this is the real deal, my dear. Forgive my insensitive tone, but I can't help but be happy for you,' smiled Magister. 'You have already taken the first step towards overcoming your demons.'

'Let's get one thing straight, mate. I'm here to find my daughter, I don't need counselling, so spare me the sympathy. I just want any information I can find on this Doctor. I'm going to put a stop to this.'

'Rose Tyler, from the Powell Estate?' said Magister.

'You know something?' replied Jackie, suddenly taking an interest and regretting being so dismissive of the shrink.

'I think you should sit down.' Magister ushered the two of them to the double circle of wooden chairs on the stage. 'How fortuitous that this should be your first session.'

Jackie tried to protest, but Magister put his fingers to her lips, and it was as if she'd been immediately silenced. No one had ever been able to do that before.

There were around thirty people in the two-rowed arrangement – an unlikely mix of young and old from across the social spectrum, silently waiting for the formalities to begin.

Jackie expected Magister to take a seat in the circle, but instead he stood in the

middle and called the meeting to order. Somehow he found a way of looking at everyone in equal measure with those hypnotic eyes of his as he span around, addressing his captivated audience like a consummate performer.

‘... and a special welcome to our newcomers.’

Caroline looked around the circle – apart from Jackie, it was the usual suspects.

‘Take a seat. Don’t be shy,’ continued Magister.

Jackie cranked his neck to see who was loitering at the back of the church.

‘Oh my god, it’s Suzie Beamish’s dad. This was a very bad idea.’

‘She won’t come in,’ called Beamish. ‘I can’t get her out of the car.’

Magister’s face darkened, and Jackie thought she’d detected the faintest of scowls.

‘But she must, Mr Beamish... she really must. These people are depending on her.’

‘It’s too soon, she isn’t ready, Magister.’

‘It’s okay, Dad, I’m here.’

Jackie’s face dropped at the sight of Suzie Beamish walking into the church. She was usually made up to the nines, but she looked like she’d been dragged through a hedge backwards, and then some. Slowly Beamish led his shaken daughter to the circle.

‘You see, my friends,’ snarled Magister. ‘This is what the beloved Doctor does to people in his care. Tell them Suzie, tell them everything.’

Magister held out a hand, beckoning her to join him in the centre.

‘I can do this, Dad, sit down, please,’ said Suzie.

Suzie helped her Father to a back row chair. Trying to look reassuring, she insisted he stay there. ‘They need to know the truth, Dad.’

No one dared make a sound as she walked up to Magister and took his hand. She stared blankly into space, unable to find any words at first.

Caroline pulled Jackie back from breaking the silence.

‘Rose must have been with her,’ Jackie whispered. ‘I need to know.’

‘Look at her. Let her speak in her own time,’ replied Caroline.

‘It all happened so fast,’ said Suzie, finally. ‘He promised me the world, said he could show me all of time and space, take me anywhere I wanted.’

‘Rose could never fall for such nonsense,’ whispered Jackie.

‘And what made you believe him?’ prompted Magister.

‘The blue box. He said it was his time machine and he could prove it to me.’

‘Mickey said something about a blue box,’ muttered Jackie.

‘And how would he do that?’ continued Magister.

‘He went inside it, a wind came out of nowhere and then the box just vanished. Just a few seconds later it came back. The doors opened and he was there again, only this time standing next to him...’

Suzie broke down.

‘... standing next to him was my nan.’

Mr Beamish was shaking his head, biting his tongue as he suppressed the rage.

‘She died when Suzie was six. It broke my little girl’s heart,’ he explained.

‘But you know that can’t be true, can it Suzie?’ said Magister.

‘I do now, but it was so real. She spoke to me, hugged me, and all the memories came flooding back. It was like I was six again. She said I should join them and how could I say no?’

Jackie’s heart sank. If anything could get Rose to go off with a stranger it would be the promise of seeing her Dad again.

‘Inside a box, no bigger than a phone booth?’ said Magister.

‘Ridiculous, isn’t it? But from the outside looking in, it seemed massive somehow. Like the worlds he promised to show me were already there. My Nan hurried inside all excited and the stranger stood by the door and held out his hand encouraging me to follow her. He said she’d gone to pour the Yorkshire tea and cut me a slice of her unique Black Victoria Sponge. We used to call it that because she’d always make the jam filling from the blackberries in her garden. How could he know all that?’

‘You went in, and then what?’ asked Magister.

‘He must have locked me inside, because the doors slammed shut and it all went dark. No sign of my Nan, it was just an empty box. I banged on the walls, screaming for someone to get me out, but nobody came. I thought I was going to die. Hours must have passed. Last thing I remember is going lightheaded and struggling to breathe.’

‘Thank you Suzie,’ said Magister. ‘That took extraordinary courage. You can sit down now, my child. Go to your father.’

Proudly taking centre stage again, Magister addressed his captive audience. ‘Suzie was found yesterday, abandoned and barely conscious in Box Hill quarry, no sign of the Doctor or his blue box. What happened to her exactly remains a mystery. It took hypnosis to get her to remember this much, but there are still gaps, gaps that even I cannot fill. The only thing we can know for sure is that the Doctor cannot be trusted. You must not search for him. Leave it to the authorities.’

Jackie snapped.

‘If the police know it’s him, then why are they still questioning people on the estate? And what about the fact his box says ‘Police’ on it? If we want to stop him, we’re going to have to do it ourselves. We can’t trust the authorities.’

‘You can trust me, Jackie. You see, I am not just assisting the police with their enquiries, I have appointed myself their chief investigator. This so-called menace of the Powell Estate is working on a global scale. Suzie’s story is by no means unique. Every time there is a report of a missing person, I make it my business to ensure that the Doctor must always be under suspicion.’

‘I don’t get what’s in it for him. Thank god he didn’t assault my girl,’ said Beamish, ‘but what kind of sick person would do such a thing?’

‘That’s what I intend to find out. By making him my patient when he is finally caught. But until then, you must take care of yourselves and you must never speak of this man again, not outside the group. We mustn’t let him know we are on to him.’

‘But Rose is still missing. What if she thought she’d seen my Pete and was lured inside that box?’

‘Then search the quarry, if you must. We must hope that he returns all his victims, just like Suzie.’

‘What do you think, Doctor Magister? Is the Doctor an alien?’ asked Caroline.

‘Alien or trickster, malicious or misguided, he is a menace to society. Right now, he thinks he is oh so clever, the manipulator of stupid, impressionable humans, but I will have mastery over him. Soon he will meet his match.’

As proficient as he was at doing it, the Master hated working in the shadows, especially whenever the Doctor was his target. He missed the days when he could brazenly face off against his dandified nemesis and claim ownership of his precious earth and its pathetic humans. He’d been itching to acquaint himself with this latest incarnation, especially as he was clearly operating under the assumption that he was the last of the Time Lords. What utter hubris to assume that A. he was the only survivor, and that B. he was ultimately responsible for his people’s destruction.

That was his MO, not the Doctor’s. He had no right. He might be able to pull the wool over the eyes of UNIT’s latest bunch of wannabe soldiers, to claim his special status as their scientific advisor whenever the Earth once again, and quite

inexplicably, became the target of an alien invasion or conspiracy. But it was time for a handover of power. Time for the Doctor to hang up his ethically charged boots and go back to being that aimless wanderer, clueless and unattached.

Sometime in the Doctor's future, the events of the Time War would either be written, or exposed as a lie. How else could he have travelled beyond the wall, past the point at which he had fallen into the Eye of Harmony, to a time zone that had previously been off limits despite his best efforts to breach it? But the Master did not care how he could be here; it was a bonus for him not to have to hide from his people while they still apparently assumed this zone was impenetrable. Furthermore, he had no intention of giving the Doctor even a semblance of hope that one day Gallifrey would return, that one day he might not have to live with the guilt, albeit, guilt of his own making and invention. All he had to do, to claim the earth as his playground, was discredit the Doctor. And the Doctor, much to his surprise, was making it all so easy for him.

‘How was the therapy group, Doctor Magister?’

‘Oh it was quite the success, Miss Bigley,’ he replied to his maid, puffing on his cigar and relaxing in the leather recliner in the lounge of his latest stately home. ‘You know, I’m always surprised how good it feels to be helping people.’

Violet Bigley wheeled in the tea service, hoping her insufferable boss wouldn't blow up at the sound of the squeaky wheels. Being careful not to clang the china, she poured him some Earl Grey.

‘Not much crime for me to circle for you tonight, I’m afraid,’ she said, placing the evening paper on the coffee table. ‘It’s all full of celebrity gossip and scandal.’

The Master gritted his teeth and stubbed out his cigar. He flicked open the cigar box for another, and, smiled as, out of his maid's view, he pushed aside her miniaturised predecessors. This one had only been employed for a week and already he was tempted to add her to the collection.

‘Then for breakfast, do be sure to bring me some good news in the morning papers. If the English broadsheets have nothing then go international,’ he said. ‘That will be all.’

Violet curtsied like she was from another age, but the Master did not dignify the pathetic gesture with a smile.

‘For heaven's sake, woman, get some oil on that wretched trolley,’ he snarled as she left.

He picked up the paper ready to throw it straight into the open fire, but stopped

when he saw what was on the front page.

‘The Ghost of Windsor Castle. Fake, Fraud or simply Fantastic?’

It was him, the Doctor grinning like a Cheshire cat in a series of blown up photographs of various rooms inside the palace.

‘What on earth are you playing at now, Doctor? Have you completely lost your mind?’

He began to wonder if the Doctor was somehow already onto him, and that this was some kind of coded message to taunt him. Whatever the reasoning behind it, this was going to draw some unwelcome attention from the likes of Jackie Tyler and Mr Beamish. He would need to move his plan forward far quicker than he’d anticipated.

‘Poor Suzie,’ said Caroline, shivering outside the local newsagent. On the way back from the group, Jackie had spotted the headline on the sandwich board, and now with paper in hand they were staring at the Doctor’s face in disbelief. ‘Having to see him plastered on the front pages like some kind of celebrity.’

‘Told you he was part of the establishment. A modern day slave trader, maybe? What if Rose is being used as a servant at the palace? Maybe Suzie didn’t make the grade?’

‘If only,’ replied Caroline. ‘I mean all the other explanations are a hell of a lot worse.’

‘It’s like he’s laughing at us. How can he get away with it?’

‘Magister will know what to do.’

Jackie snorted. ‘Yeah, right.’

‘He got Suzie back, didn’t he? I’m going to call him as soon as we get back.’

‘Okay, but I’m not staying tonight. I mean, thanks for the help, but it’s about time I went home.’

‘You sure it’s safe?’

‘Well, Mr Beamish is going to stay with me for a while. For protection, nothing else. He says it’s hell at home at the moment and he’d sooner be out looking for the Doctor than spend another minute with his wife. She is smothering Suzie right now, and I don’t blame her. I’d be doing exactly the same.’

‘So the two of you are planning to go all out dynamic duo? You’re seriously going to hunt down the Doctor together?’

‘Too right. And now we have something to go on.’

‘What are you going to do? Storm the palace? That’ll go well, not. Just remember what happened to my Clive. It’ll be you next.’

The Doctor was clearly excited about taking Rose on her maiden TARDIS voyage, but as keen as she was, Rose didn’t appreciate being rushed, not when she had so many unanswered questions. There was something almost sexy about the Doctor’s childlike impatience, but if she was about to put her life in the hands of a stranger from another planet, she had to keep her wits about her and not let him sweep her off her feet.

‘That was you, wasn’t it, Doctor, saving that family from boarding the Titanic? Why them, though? Why didn’t you save them all, melt the iceberg with your sonic or something?’

‘When I said you could come, I wasn’t expecting the third degree,’ replied the Doctor testily. ‘Forget planet Earth, it’s not important.’

‘Not important? It will always be my home.’

‘While it’s still there. I felt that way about my place, too, once. But all bad things come to an end, eventually.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘You’ll soon learn.’

‘I wonder how many other traces you’ve left behind, you should have seen how many files Clive had on you. JFK, Krakatoa...’

‘I do get around, don’t I?’ grinned the Doctor. ‘So, where first, Rose Tyler...’

‘They won’t stop looking for you, you know that, right? Just because Clive died... there’s a whole bunch of them on your case.’

‘And not just humans,’ nodded the Doctor. ‘What? You think a gang of conspiracy theorists could get anywhere without an extra-terrestrial tip-off or two? I’m not the only alien to have walked the earth, looking like I belong here. The TARDIS picked up alien traces outside the house. Either Clive wasn’t who he seemed, or someone else was feeding him intelligence. But don’t worry, Rose Tyler, I’ve taken steps to put a stop to it. If they think they are a laughing stock already, they better grow some thicker skins.’

‘You sound so cruel, Doctor. Maybe Mrs Finch’s therapist was right.’

‘Clive’s widow has a therapist?’

‘I met him on the bus. He thinks I’d end up being hurt by you. And from what

he said, Mrs Finch isn't the only patient who has a story to tell about how you ruined her life.'

'Well, you're not the first person I've picked up in my travels, there have been many others. For most of them after one trip I know it's not going to work out, but I always make them forget and take them home. Or thereabouts depending on the mood of the TARDIS. Nobody needs to end up being hurt by me.'

'Maybe I should call him?'

Rose showed the Doctor Magister's card.

'Magister? Now that's a name you don't come across very often. A long time ago I met this vicar at Devil's... no, no – it can't be.'

Having been mildly amused by Rose's concerns, suddenly the Doctor was in an awful mood.

'What's wrong? Worried you're about to get found out or something?'

'What did he look like?' demanded the Doctor. 'The man on the bus, what did he look like, Rose?'

'I dunno... bit oriental, dark eyes. Oh and he had a goatee.'

The Doctor smashed his fist against the console.

'This has got personal now. I've got this all wrong. This shapeshifting alien has been the one getting the tip-offs, not the other way around. Someone has been feeding him information about me. One of Clive's lot, probably some disgruntled ex-UNIT officer with a chip on his shoulder. Well, whoever you are, this has to stop.'

'Shapeshifting alien? The guy was a bit strange, I'll give you that, but he was just a man on a bus.'

'Who just happens to have been dead for decades. It can't possibly be him. Whoever is trying to discredit me is using that man's identity to get my attention.'

'Why would an alien want to do that? Aren't they supposed to be scared of you?'

'Exactly. I show up at UNIT HQ to offer my services and immediately get arrested, leaving the planet vulnerable to an alien invasion. Question is, do I really need to know the face behind the mask to be able to stop them?'

'You could call him,' suggested Rose, offering him her mobile.

'And have whoever it is drag up my past? Not happening. But if he wants to spread the word about me... well, I say – let him have it. Time to stop skulking around in the shadows. You said so yourself, the Milk Tray man is so last year.'

Rose flinched as the Doctor ripped up the card. 'What are you really hiding,

Doctor?’ she said, feeling less safe than ever in his presence. ‘This person from your past you say an alien is impersonating, what’s so important about him?’

‘Don’t you understand? He’s dead Rose. They are all dead and it’s my fault,” raged the Doctor.

‘So he was a friend of yours?’

‘I don’t want to talk about it. All you need to know is it can’t be him. Rose, what I am about to ask you... well, if you already have doubts, then everything inside you will be screaming ‘Don’t do it.’ I need you to trust me, more than ever.’

When they turned into the street, Jackie and Caroline were stunned to find a fire-engine parked outside the Finch residence.

Caroline immediately ran to the scene. To her relief, she found her parents stood with the crew, hugging her two boys.

Mickey’s car was in flames.

‘I think it’s best the boys stay with us for the foreseeable future,’ said Caroline’s father.

‘Don’t be ridiculous. This has nothing to do with the...’

Jackie caught up with them and screamed out the Doctor’s name in horror.

‘Just for a few days, love,’ said Caroline’s mother. ‘Your father knows best.’

‘Your car, I take it?’ said the fireman to Jackie. ‘I hope it was insured.’

‘Oh well done, you,’ replied Jackie, clapping slowly. ‘The single mum from the Powell Estate probably doesn’t even have a licence, right?’

‘Hey, I didn’t say that. Calm down.’

‘What happened to it, a mechanical fault?’ Caroline asked.

‘Too early to say, Miss. We’re here to put out the fire, the investigators will be round in the morning to check it out.’

‘I hated it, but Rose loved that car,’ said Jackie. ‘That’s why Mickey chose it over the black mini... the soppy sod.’

Inside the Finchs’ shed, Magister was reactivating Clive’s dormant Who is Doctor Who? website when Jackie and Caroline walked in, having just waved goodbye to her parents and the boys.

‘What are you doing here? How did you...’

‘Was that you? Did you torch my car?’ shouted Jackie.

‘Mrs Finch, Mrs Tyler... I was so moved by Suzie’s story tonight that I decided it was time to go public after all. Soon the whole world will know who the Doctor really is. He will have nowhere left to run.’

‘But the car?’ said Jackie.

‘He was here. The Doctor was here, hoping to destroy the evidence and prevent you from getting to the truth. He tried to burn the shed down at first, but I stopped him. Told him the files were in the car.’

‘And he believed you, just like that? Pull the other one.’

‘I can be very persuasive, Mrs Tyler. Isn’t that right, Caroline?’

‘I trust him, Jackie,’ Caroline replied without hesitation.

‘Then where is the Doctor now? Have you arrested him?’

Magister looked decidedly shifty.

‘See? He’s lying Caroline, can’t you see he’s lying?’

Magister held his hands up.

‘You’ve got me, but it was only to protect you,’ he said.

‘I don’t need your protection. So come on then, tell us what really happened here?’

‘Very well, if you insist,’ shrugged Magister. ‘I can do better than that.’

Magister played back a recording of the night’s events on Clive’s monitor.

‘It can’t be...’ said Jackie. The picture was grainy and dark, but the figure running from the shed and throwing a flaming torch inside Mickey’s car was unmistakable. It wasn’t the Doctor. It was Rose.

‘I can’t believe she would...’

‘The Doctor has manipulated her into believing his lies. It’s not her fault. We can still save her.’

Jackie looked on horrified as the camera zoomed out to show Rose running across the road into the open door of the Doctor’s blue box.

Caroline watched in amazement as the TARDIS dematerialised. ‘Suzie’s story was true all along.’

‘You let her go!’ Jackie shouted, ready to punch Magister’s lights out.

‘Yes, I let her go. It was either that or end up getting burnt to a crisp, with all the evidence gone up in smoke too,’ said Magister. ‘At least we know she is alive.’

‘For now,’ said Jackie, struggling to resist that calming voice. What troubled her more than the fact that Rose had committed a crime, or even that she had

apparently been magicked away, was the fact she was still wearing the same clothes she'd left the house in all those weeks ago.

'I don't understand how it could have possibly helped,' said Rose, back inside the TARDIS and still fretting about doing the Doctor's dirty work.

'Then let's find out...' replied the Doctor, adjusting the navigational settings. 'Two months in the future, that should be long enough.'

The Doctor danced around the console, pulling various levers and smashing one panel with a hammer until the time rotor began to rise and fall.

When they had landed, he opened the doors and gestured towards the exit.

'Well go on then, what are you waiting for? No need for me to come too. Any paper will do... apart from *The Sun*. Never buy *The Sun*.'

Ten minutes later, Rose came running back into the TARDIS throwing a bunch of papers at the Doctor.

'Well, you're not on the front pages anymore.'

'They've forgotten about me already? Trust those fickle humans to mess it up.'

'I wouldn't say forgotten exactly. I also found these...'

Rose showed the Doctor some greetings cards, all with the same image of the Doctor wishing a happy birthday from the most ridiculous of locations.

'Oh!' he said.

'You got your wish. From front page news to comedy meme. Your face is everywhere by the way. There's a great big billboard across the road from the newsagents. You're advertising baked beans. By swimming in them.'

'Baked beans? Sounds revolting. But beans or no beans, job's a good'un. I'm officially a joke. The go-to photoshop guy. Anything Clive and his friends have on me will be dismissed as fakes. And just as I predicted, according to the TARDIS, I'm now the only alien in the village. Just Time Lord DNA. Nobody else. Whoever was trying to drag me down has disappeared off the face of the planet.'

'Meanwhile, your face is everywhere. Step out of the TARDIS and you'll be recognised instantly.'

'Oh well, I'll just have to change it quicker than usual. Don't get too attached to this one, Rose.'

'It's not funny, Doctor. What about my mum and Mickey? How's seeing your grinning mug on a tin of beans going to make them feel?'

‘I didn’t think of that. We could always do it all again, with your face next to mine, let them know you’re alive and well?’

‘Nah, you’re okay. But honestly Doctor, I still don’t get it, when you said you had something for me to do that I wouldn’t like, I thought you were going to ask me to destroy all Clive’s files, not post a bunch of silly photos to mad Murray. It’s like the opposite of what any normal person would have done.’

‘Normal never works, Rose. I played an unknown enemy at his own game and I won. It’s over, that’s all that matters. Right then, Rose Tyler, you tell me. Where do you want to go? Backwards or forwards in time. It’s your choice. What’s it going to be?’

Violet Bigley was ironing Magister’s shirts when once again she was disturbed by the drum of a noisy washing machine, so loud that it echoed throughout the house. She was convinced the mansion was haunted. Just like the other times it had happened, she was sure she hadn’t put the washing on, but she had to go and check nonetheless. She passed the grandfather clock in the hallway, back again from yet another repair, but this time she didn’t dwell on the matter, for out of the corner of her eye she thought she’d seen an actual ghost. A man in a leather jacket was rushing up the stairs. Thinking on her feet, she grabbed the hunting rifle mounted to wall between the clock and the spooky wolf’s head.

‘Stop!’ she shouted. ‘Stop or I’ll shoot.’

The big eared man turned and brazenly walked down the stairs. He grinned at her.

‘I think it’s just for decoration,’ he said.

‘What’s to stop me knocking you out with it,’ said Violet, shaking.

‘If you wanted a real weapon, I can help you with that.’

The stranger pulled out what looked like one of those new-fangled electronic screwdrivers. He pointed it at her.

‘Who are you, what are doing in Mr Magister’s house?’

Once again, the stranger grinned.

Violet looked on in horror as he turned the screwdriver on himself and burnt a line around the edge of his face.

‘Even one face-ache around here is too many,’ he said, before peeling off his entire face to reveal the face of her boss.

‘Mr Magister, I don’t understand...’

‘No and you never will.’

Magister unscrewed the screwdriver, and pulled out a pen-like object from inside its casing.

Violet dropped the gun and fell to her knees.

‘I’m very disappointed in you. Consider your employment terminated. I can’t work with a shrinking violet.’

It had become quite fun, surprisingly so given the physical absence of the Doctor, but within weeks things had turned sour for the Master. The face of the man he was trying to frame was already everywhere thanks to the newspaper photographs, and nobody was taking his allegations seriously. Whether as an internet meme, a marketing tool, or a cipher for a two fingers up at the establishment, the Doctor had become a fictional celebrity. Any claim that he was an actual person was being filed alongside sightings of Elvis, ‘Paul is dead’ rumours, and other urban legends. The Master had even given the Earth authorities graphic video evidence of the Doctor snatching another girl and locking her up in his empty blue box. But the victims he had selected to set up his old adversary were all being treated as either scammers or fantasists, even when he’d ditched the disappearing trick in favour of bog-standard, no frills kidnaps. Wearing fake skin was fun at first, aside from the time he’d swapped it for that one of the Doctor’s foul-smelling female companion in order to get her insufferable mother on side, but now the entire scheme was losing all its appeal.

‘It’s fake, like the ones in the papers. You’re lucky I’m not arresting you for wasting police time,’ said the latest police inspector to be presented with the Master’s evidence.

The Master didn’t even bother to maintain his disguise this time.

‘No wonder this planet is mocked the universe over for its failed justice system.’

‘You’re just asking to be locked up, aren’t you?’

‘Last time I looked, unlawful miniaturisation wasn’t in the Statute Book. Goodbye, Inspector.’

Outside Edinburgh’s central police station, Jackie Tyler was sat in the black mini

she planned to give to Mickey as a peace offering if Rose did come back. She'd spent much of the last two months taxiing Magister around various locations up and down the UK, while he handed in yet more information on the Doctor's crimes.

She called Caroline, who was coping surprisingly well with seeing the Doctor's face everywhere.

'We have to have nailed him now. You saw the video evidence, right?' she said.

'I told you, I'm done with this, Jackie. I hope you are right, but leave me out of it now. I've got my boys back now and they are my priority. Magister said I was ready to leave the group. I can't let you drag me down again. I'm sorry.'

'Yeah,' said Jackie. She hung up, jealous that Mrs Finch could even begin to talk about rebuilding her life. 'I bet he did. But only because he's got me doing his dirty work instead.' Jackie resented the fact that Magister could rely on his support. She wanted to move on, because nothing about this lifestyle was healthy. Even Mr Beamish had called it a day, though the excuses had started as soon as he'd heard what had happened to Mickey's Beetle. But Rose was still missing, and nobody else seemed bothered. Even Mickey had come to terms with it by inventing an elaborate theory that Rose and the Doctor were in cahoots in some moneymaking scheme, sunning it up in the Bahamas or some other exotic location.

Magister had become completely obsessed with the Doctor, a far cry from the man who had once told Jackie to let it go. Now it was like looking in the mirror. Jackie even started to suspect that the therapist must have had a personal connection to another victim. Not that she ever got anywhere trying to talk to him.

'Oh, great,' said Jackie, starting the car up again. Magister was clearly seething as he approached. 'Another wasted trip?'

'This is getting us nowhere. We must find out who was responsible for the original paparazzi photos,' said Magister. 'If he's not an accomplice of the Doctor, he can at least tell us how he came by the images.'

Jackie just laughed.

Magister looked at her with utter disgust, and clenched that odd oversized pen of his as if was about to stab her with it.

'Sorry,' she said, "but here we are in Scotland, and now you want us to go back to where it all started. Back to the Powell Estate?'

'The Powell Estate?'

‘Yes, that old pervert Murray French was taking all the credit for them.’

‘Murray French? Red skinned man with the belly? I know him, I saved his life when Beamish was about to come at him with a hammer. Earlier that day, I’d even helped him catch a bus to town... so that’s what was in the envelope. It’s as if the Doctor has been taunting me. I was so close. French will be a rich man now, only a fool with means would still be living there.’

‘That’s not what I heard. He’s going nowhere. The papers are suing him for the fake pictures. He’s going to need an expensive legal team.’

‘Oh, he won’t have to worry about that, not when I’m done with him. Drive!’

UNIT had commandeered all the remaining photographs from Murray French’s house and had taken him to a secure location for questioning.

The Colonel was struggling to understand the Doctor’s motivations for making such a public spectacle of himself.

‘What is the Doctor playing at? How are we supposed to use him now? What is this? Some kind of mid-life crisis for a Time Lord?’

‘That’s the least of our concerns,’ said the investigating officer. ‘We’ve recovered thousands of photos from Murray’s house and laptop, all of them with the Doctor in the frame. Well, all of them except this one...’

‘What am I supposed to be looking at?’ said the Colonel.

‘One of the men is Cyril Beamish. His daughter was the girl found in Box Hill who claimed to have been abducted by the Doctor.’

‘And the other?’

‘We passed him through image recognition software. We believe he is usually referred to as the Master.’

‘The Master? Last known sighting three decades ago?’

The officer nodded.

‘And unlike the Doctor, he hasn’t changed a bit. This file is brief, but it makes for interesting reading.’

‘“Renegade Time Lord... redacted... full records available in the Black Archives.” But that’s impossible. The Doctor says he is the only one left.’

‘Unless these two are working together. The Doctor was missing for years too. We have no idea if he can still be trusted. We know the Doctor lies...’

‘Usually for good reason... in the end.’

‘There were concerns lodged at the time that the Doctor could be overly

lenient on the man. That we should be wary of his judgements. The pair do have history.'

'We keep this to ourselves, do you hear me? The Doctor must never know. But in the meantime, put out a call to every police force. Send them the mugshot of this Master fellow and see that he is apprehended on first sight.'

'Bloody hell,' said Jackie, as she pulled the car up on the Powell Estate, hours after leaving Scotland.

UNIT officers were swarming the estate, with guards positioned outside Murray French's flat.

Magister slipped out of the car, looking extremely jittery.

Jackie wound down the window.

'Where do you think you are going?'

'My work here is done. It's up to you now, Jackie. You're the new webmaster now.'

'Webmaster, you are joking right?'

'There must be someone who can help, that boyfriend of your daughter's? Find the Doctor and destroy him. Oh, and while you're at it, see to it that Mr Beamish knows that French was involved in his daughter's disappearance, after all. Give him my permission to use the hammer. Good day to you.'

'Wait,' said Jackie, but Magister was already running.

Jackie watched as further down the street Magister bumped into a familiar face. It was CSO Pratt, eager to be involved in the action as ever.

Magister was gesticulating at him with that pen of his, but the next thing she knew, Pratt had vanished, leaving Magister to walk unchallenged off the estate.

Jackie rubbed her eyes.

It had been a long drive.

She banged his head against the steering wheel. One day she would rub her eyes and the nightmare would all go away.

One day her Rose would return.

The noise of a thousand angry winds, the very same sound she had heard through the monitor speaker when the blue box had disappeared outside Caroline Finch's house, brought her back to the present moment.

'It can't be!' she shouted, rushing out of the car towards the source.

By the time she had reached the edge of the estate, the wind had abated and

silence had fallen.

Had she been more observant she would have noticed that the red telephone box next to the bus stop had vanished.

The One Place

Kara Dennison

‘I’ve got a riddle for ya. How does the Doctor count to thirteen?’

The day had been fine until that moment – as fine as a day *could* be, under the circumstances. The Doctor had lost so much in so short a time. Amy and Rory weren’t the first, of course, not by a damn sight. And they wouldn’t be the last. But they had each other now. And what did he have? A secret, and no one to tell it to. A secret that, any time now, would die with him.

Until the TARDIS doors creaked open of their own accord, and the Doctor remembered what *else* he had, life after life, like it or not. He didn’t even have to turn around to recognise his visitor. The nasal tone, the slight snarl in his voice, the almost offensively American pronunciation of ‘DOK-terrrrr.’

‘I don’t care,’ the Doctor muttered, hunching over the console.

‘One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight... ehrrrrrr?’ The voice rose and trailed off into a weak, questioning tone.

‘Is that your Tight Five? Not impressed, everyone’s doing insult comedy these days. Have you considered props? Funny hats always work a treat for me.’

The man in the TARDIS doorway grinned, that grin like an 80s movie villain one act away from being dropped out of a helicopter. He leaned against the doorframe and chuckled. ‘I like that about you, see. I like a lot about you, believe it or not, but that’s a big one. Quipping at death. It’s very you.’ He paused, holding a hand in front of him, tracing the shape of the Doctor’s face appraisingly from a distance. ‘Not sure about the young look, though. Feels like you’re overcompensating.’

‘Questions,’ the Doctor said quietly.

‘What?’

‘Questions.’ His voice was stronger. He straightened his stance, looked the man in the eye. ‘Why. No, how. How *and* why, actually. This Master. This face. It’s not right. You shouldn’t be here.’ And it was true. The old body – *stolen* body, the Doctor reminded himself – was centuries removed from his own experience. Some poor ambulance driver sacrificed on the altar of eternal life, one more of the Master’s grabs at immortality. And the Doctor had seen it through to its end (or so he believed), absorbed into the Eye of Harmony. Then why was *he* here, all in one piece, leather jacket and all?

‘I’ve not caught you in the midst of things,’ the Doctor pressed on. ‘It’s not

New Year's Eve 1999, it's the Third Summer of Revitalised Calendar Year 863.9. And it's not Earth, it's—'

'I changed my mind.' The Master grimaced, stepping the rest of the way into the TARDIS. The doors swung closed behind him, the Doctor noticed resentfully, as though passively approving of the man's presence there. 'The nervous rambling is too much.'

The Doctor bristled. 'I'm *not* nervous. And *you're* not supposed to be here.'

The Master grinned again, spreading his arms wide. 'I'm wherever I damn well wanna be. You know that. And I damn well wanna be right here. Right now. With you.'

'Why?'

'You didn't like my joke?'

'What joke?'

'Ahhh.' The Master giggled. It was unnerving. 'You know it. I know it. Gallifrey *would* know it if you hadn't... you know.' He made a vague *fwish* motion with one hand.

The Doctor hardened his stare.

'You're *out*,' the Master said at last. 'You're dry. I did the math. Sorry, *maths*. You rode the bicycle too hard, dropped a few pieces off here and there, and now you're done. All tapped out of regenerations, just like me.'

'So you've come to have a laugh?'

'No, I've come to ask... what are you going to do?'

The two stared at each other, the Master grinning, the Doctor deadpan. Finally, an answer:

'Nothing.'

'Oh, boo! *Boo!*' The Master glared behind his sunglasses as the Doctor flipped a switch to open the TARDIS doors again. 'Boring! Come on! Really? All this time, all this work, and you're just gonna lie down and die?'

'What is it you *want* me to do?'

The Master clenched a fist. 'Fight. You know, like you always do. Rage against the dying of the light! Do not go... whatever.' He waved a hand, paused, turned, switched tactics.

'You're really gonna leave the universe unprotected? After all you've done? You know what'll happen as soon as you're gone, right? Every big baddie from all across spacetime will launch an attack. The Daleks, the Cybermen, the Sontarans...'

'You?'

‘I wouldn’t have it in me. It wouldn’t be fair without you.’ The Master clapped his gloved hands together. ‘No, no, no. I’ve got something much better in mind. Much cooler. You’ll love it.’

The Doctor quirked a nearly non-existent eyebrow. ‘Your idea of ‘cool’ is usually very uncool. Pass.’

‘I dunno. A second chance? More lives? With minimal effort? Sounds pretty cool to me, Doctor. Hear me out.’

Against his better judgment, the Doctor chose to hear the Master out.

‘There’s a space station. *Avalon Gamma*. A few lives ago... hah, *lots* of lives ago... I sold them some of my blood. They were working on a serum to reset that thing. You know, the thing that says how many times a cell can divide before it stops dying.’

‘Hayflick limit,’ the Doctor answered dispassionately.

‘That’s the guy. Well, the project just... ended. Ethical concerns, money ran out, maybe they actually made a breakthrough and scared themselves. No one knows exactly why. But they all took off for new stations and left their data behind. Now it’s just floating out there unattended: a big, crumbling treasure box.’ The Master rubbed his hands together. ‘There’s a chance – don’t wanna get your hopes up *too* far – that we could finish what they started with what they left behind. Completely reset our regeneration cycles. A *whole* new set for the low, low price of sweet F-A.’

The Doctor lifted his head slightly.

The Master cackled. ‘See? I knew you’d go for it. No one knows you better, right?’ He breezed over to the Doctor, throwing an arm around his shoulder. ‘Here’s what I’m proposing. We go to *Avalon Gamma*, you and me, after everyone’s gone. Just a little fact-finding mission, see if there’s anything to work with. If so, we finish up their work, tinker with it a bit to make sure it’s up to snuff. Then you and me take a little pop of the results and go on with our lives.’

‘Why not do that *before*, then?’ The Doctor kept his eyes fixed on the open TARDIS doors, as if willing the Master to let go of his shoulder and see himself out. ‘Instead of stealing other bodies? If you can just nip off for a quick swig of immortal juice, why bother with the headgear and fancy robes? Or was that an aesthetics thing?’

‘Ah, that.’ The Master nodded approvingly. Where he was in his timeline, he may only just have been there: New Year’s Eve 1999, facing off with a shoeless, long-haired Doctor who’d just divested himself of a heart probe in the back of a lady’s Jeep. A strange few days, days the Doctor himself only vaguely

remembered through the fog of a fresh regeneration and human anaesthesia.

‘Well,’ the Master pushed on, ‘for one, this is *experimental*. Like I said. Your little hang-ups with it aside, bodysnatching is the more reliable method. For two, it could use a second pair of eyes to get everything right, and this is the first time I’ve had that opportunity. And...’ He grinned. ‘It’s so fun to screw with you.’

‘Get out.’ The Doctor stormed around the console, but he didn’t lay hands on the Master – just pointed and glared. ‘I know what you think you’re doing. You think you’ll show me I’m no better than you, that we’re oh so much the same...’

‘You don’t think that, too?’

‘I *said*, get off my ship.’

The Master put up his hands. ‘Fine. Fine. I got it wrong. I thought, ah, you might finally be able to sympathise. With this.’ He gestured to himself. ‘But I guess you really are just *that* noble. Go gently into that good night, I guess.’

He strolled calmly toward the doors and fired the parting shot.

‘I’m impressed. The one place you’ve never been, and you’re not even a little afraid.’

The Doctor groaned in frustration and threw the switch again, the doors slamming in the Master’s face before he could leave. The Master turned on his heel.

‘Fine. We’ll go to *Avalon Gamma*,’ the Doctor said tersely. ‘But we go by my rules. I’m telling you my rules now. Ready?’

‘If we must.’

‘One: we don’t kill anyone.’ The Doctor paused. ‘By which I mean, no one dies through any action or inaction on either of our parts, together or separately. And any other little loopholes I may have missed – yes, *no loopholes deaths*. We’ll both be under a loophole death embargo.’

The Master wrinkled his nose. ‘You’re such a buzzkill.’

‘Two: we take the finished serum and *nothing else*. No stealing from the space station.’

‘So now I’m a petty thief? Please.’

‘Three: once we get the serum, we take it at the same time. And I administer both doses.’

‘Hey.’ The Master held up a hand. ‘Why you?’

‘Because,’ the Doctor replied patiently, ‘I’m the only one here who isn’t a murderer.’

The Master snorted. ‘Yeah, I can think of a few places that would disagree—’

‘*Fine*. We administer our own doses.’ The Doctor straightened, lifting his chin,

going for the most imperious glare he had in his arsenal. He was the Oncoming Storm, after all. The Time Lord Victorious. The Lonely God.

His knees wobbled a bit.

‘Deal?’

The Master scratched his head. ‘I dunno. You’re getting awful rules-y for someone in your position.’ But instead of belabouring the issue, he shrugged. ‘Eh. Whatever. I knew what to expect when I came here.’

There was no handshake, no formal agreement. A look passed between them, one that hadn’t changed since their school days, no matter how many different pairs of eyes they’d looked through. An unspoken temporary truce... though a little ricketier each time.

‘Behold,’ the Master said grandly, in a tone that would have fared far better coming from one of his other faces, ‘the glorious *Avalon Gamma*, circa... now.’

The Doctor poked his head out of the TARDIS. ‘Yep.’ He popped the P loudly. ‘It does look like your scene.’

‘Well, be fair. It didn’t *always* look like this.’

The TARDIS had come to rest in what must once have been some sort of courtyard or atrium. The room was about the size of a dance hall, and years ago its load-bearing beams would have been camouflaged by the friendly curves of artistic pillars and archways. But these classical overlays had largely broken and fallen away from their metal bases, giving the structure the look of an ancient, rusted robot crashing its way upward through a Roman city. The only light in the space was supplied by green luminescent emergency strips and the TARDIS’s own roof light.

‘*Avalon Gamma* was a home away from home for the scientists,’ the Master explained, strolling out into the atrium and spreading out his gloved hands. ‘When I was first here, it was like being in a mythical garden. Water fixtures, live plants. You and one of your girls woulda had a great time here.’

The Doctor bristled, then stretched his neck as the feeling passed. He stepped out of the TARDIS as well, pulling the door closed behind him. Breathable atmosphere, even outside the TARDIS’s immediate protective bubble, and – he gave an experimental hop – gravity just slightly out of whack with Earth’s, like a guitar string that’s gone a bit out of tune.

‘Unmistakably of human design,’ he muttered to himself, running a hand over the remains of one plain white pillar – plaster, with the resilience of a decoration at a cheap Christmas festival. ‘They always do like a bit of home with them wherever they go.’

He did some quick mental maths from their spacetime coordinates – 2163, by Earth’s reckoning. Summer. ‘But that can’t be right. I’ve never heard of humans doing this research with any degree of success. Not now, definitely not at the time when this place would’ve been occupied. *Trying*, yes...’

‘Far from home, remember? Pretty private up here, even then.’

‘Hmm.’ The Doctor peered around the atrium. ‘Spaceship full of scientists meddling with Time Lord knowledge to gain immortality. Still don’t like it.’

The Master raised an eyebrow; the Doctor could only wonder what kind of glare the Master’s snake-like eyes were issuing from behind his mirrored sunglasses. ‘Still, eh? Another story for another time, I’m sure.’

‘Well, yes. By your reckoning, we’ll have all the time in the world. What were they experimenting with before you showed up? Turtle DNA? Proprietary blend of herbs and coffee berries?’ The Doctor’s interest had been piqued – and he hated it. Never mind the possible serum. Here was a satellite he’d never heard of, something clearly out of place compared to his own knowledge of How Things Ought to Be... and worst of all, the Master smiling placidly over all of it.

He had to know. Before anything else, he had to know how this all started.

‘Tell me,’ the Doctor went on, swiftly turning over broken bits of ceiling to expose whatever he could of the deck’s former glory. ‘Tell me whatever you can about this place when you were here last.’

The Master threw himself wearily into what was probably a very nicely upholstered chair several decades ago, but now sat grey and empty like a relinquished throne. Dust billowed up around him, and for a moment he looked like a modern Mephistopheles making his entrance upward through a trapdoor.

‘Not much to tell, really. Lots of people here – mostly human, though a few non-Earth types were allowed in when they got curious, based on what they could contribute. Including me, obviously. Generally loners, all screened to hell and back. They threw me straight in the brig as soon as I arrived, didn’t let me out until they were satisfied I wasn’t coming to rat them out.’

The Doctor laughed to himself.

‘Officially,’ the Master pressed on, ‘no one back on Earth knew what they were really up to. Not sure what they actually thought was up, but I’m assuming the cover story was tight enough for their people to have been left to their own

devices. I barely knew. Just got the basics, did a few labs, then they told me to get lost and pretend I hadn't seen anything.'

The Doctor listened with one bit of his brain, filing away the Master's ramblings for later. The rest of his brain followed his eyes as he scoured the space around them. The breaks in the plaster were caused by age and cheap material, not any sort of force. He hopped up and down again.

'Why?'

The Master shrugged. 'Good question. *I* sure as hell wouldn't trust me enough to let me go.'

'No, not *that* why.' The Doctor waved a hand. 'Gravity, yes. Air, yes. Lights... no.' He turned to the Master. 'Did you tell anyone we were coming?'

'This place has been abandoned for ages. Who would I tell?'

'Not a welcome wagon, then.' The Doctor peered at the luminescent strips. One was slightly askew, not flush with the point where the wall met the ceiling. Put up clumsily. 'Home alone.'

The Master grinned. 'I was always more a *Christmas Story* fan.'

'When you're alone, you turn off what you don't need to save energy for what you do.' The Doctor pointed upward, tracing the crooked line of the luminescent strip. 'Or you find other ways to make do.'

'You think someone's still here?' The Master raised his eyebrows, incredulous. He looked surprised, as though caught off guard. 'There shouldn't be.'

'There are a lot of things that 'shouldn't' be,' the Doctor muttered, largely to himself. 'Doesn't stop them. You ought to know that better than anyone else. Where would a person keep themselves on this station?'

'Literally anywhere? I don't know. It's big. It once held fifty-something people, with room for twice as many.'

The atrium tapered off into large hallways opposite each other, visible behind glass doors that opened with a simple push-button to one side. Both looked equally dark, save for patchy strips of the same luminescent tape. The Doctor pulled a large coin out of his pocket. 'Heads or tails?'

'Tails.'

The Doctor flipped the coin, peeked at it, then stuffed it back in a pocket and turned to his left. 'This one.'

As soon as the two had stepped past the doors into the hallway proper, they felt their feet leave the floor. The Doctor gave a whoop of surprise, his forward trajectory making him do a slow front flip. He fumbled, arms and legs splayed,

finally finding a large handle sticking out of the wall next to him and grabbing onto it. He looked over to the other wall, where the Master held calmly onto an identical handle as he stifled a laugh with his free hand.

‘You could have said something.’ The Doctor glared accusingly.

The Master waved his free hand, letting the laugh out. ‘Yeah, but can you blame me? Come on. That was the best thing I’ve seen all day.’ Before the Doctor could retort, the Master planted one foot back on the floor and gave a push forward, zooming down the hall as he gripped the handle.

The Doctor gave an experimental push with one foot, propelling himself forward a bit. The handle was set in a track in a wall, and with a little finesse, he was able to glide forward and catch up with the Master. The fellow Time Lord had stopped at an intersection: a dead end ahead of them, with new paths leading to the left and right.

The Master put a finger to his own lips pre-emptively, then pointed down the right hallway. The Doctor listened. Footsteps. Not purposeful, but casual. Like someone wandering aimlessly through a familiar room. The Doctor floated himself over to a handle on the far side of the left wall and the two glided toward the footsteps – which sounded slower this time.

This branch of the hallway ended with a sliding door, almost as abruptly as it began. But rather than any sort of button or control, there was just a little groove in the metal, like an old pantry door. The Doctor tugged the door open enough for each of them to slide through. He allowed the Master to lead the way.

It took a second to adjust to the room’s gravity. It was a pantry, picked through and reorganised. Crates sat open with rations spilling out of them: some half consumed, some simply empty packets. But the crates of non-perishables were still piled surprisingly high, more untouched than not.

In one corner of the large storage space was what looked like a makeshift kitchenette. A chair, like the one the Master had sat in in the atrium, was pulled up to a small, round table. There were some dishes with a bit of food on them, as though the diner had been interrupted and run off. An overturned rations crate served as a counter, with a small self-powered kettle and a pile of dishes set on top. Whoever had done this, they’d done their best to manufacture a cosy kitchen setting out of what was to hand.

The Doctor approached the setup, holding his hands firmly behind his back, as though demonstrating to a tetchy shopkeeper that he had no intention of touching anything. He did, however, bend at a deep angle over it, investigating as closely as he dared.

‘What are you doing?’ the Master asked wearily.

‘Detectiving. Shush.’ He sniffed the food. ‘Fresh,’ he observed as he straightened, his voice low. ‘Well, as fresh as anything in one of these crates will be. Opened within the last half-hour, judging by the breakdown of the preservatives. The only question now is... which one of us gets to say ‘They’re behind me, aren’t they?’’

Both held still, simultaneously trying to peek over their own shoulders and at the piles of crates around them. Finally, the Master raised a hand and pointed over the Doctor’s left shoulder, his lips parting to show teeth clenched in an awkward grin.

‘Ah.’ The Doctor stepped forward, giving himself enough room to spin on his heel and face... whoever it was. ‘Whoever it was’ turned out to be a young woman, humanoid, her hair done in a pair of thick braids hanging forward over her shoulders and framing her face. She didn’t appear hostile, but she also didn’t look especially welcoming. If anything, she appeared awestruck.

‘How did you get on my ship?’ she whispered.

‘*Your* ship?’ The Doctor looked her over once more. Sure enough, she was dressed in a pale blue jumpsuit with an apple-shaped patch on the upper arm of both sleeves, each sporting an embroidered letter A and Gamma. On the front of her suit, barely hidden by the greenish-blue braid, was an embroidered nametag: ERISA. Other than a faded stain on the cuff of the right sleeve (possibly machine oil, possibly dirt – it was hard to tell), the suit was as pristine as if it had come straight out of the package.

‘How long have you been here?’ The Master stepped forward, which made Erisa stumble back, holding her hands up in front of her.

‘I was here with the others,’ she stammered, eyeing both the Doctor and the Master with fearful suspicion. ‘I have no reason to explain myself. But there is no way... no way anyone else could find this place. It’s off the grid.’

The Doctor waved a hand behind him. ‘Stand back, you’re making her nervous.’

‘So are you,’ the Master snapped.

‘I don’t make people nervous. I’m charming and agreeable.’ The Doctor adjusted his posture and his bowtie, both ending up more askew afterward. ‘Erisa – er, it’s on your nametag there, I didn’t read your mind or pluck it out of the cosmos, hah! Erisa, I’m the Doctor, and–’

The Master had already begun striding forward, gloved hands clasped, chin raised. ‘And I, my dear, am–’

‘Bruce. He’s Bruce.’

‘What?!’

‘She’s already nervous,’ the Doctor hissed over his shoulder. ‘Your standard introduction will send her straight off the deep end.’

‘Bruce was the *other* guy.’ The Master pointed at his own face. ‘At least let *me* pick a name.’

‘Oh, of course, you’d prefer something like Master Marster McMasterson.’

‘Please...’

The Doctor turned his attention back to Erisa. Her immediate nervousness appeared to have abated, but now she stood before them with her hands folded nervously in front of her, eyes downcast.

‘Please, whoever you are... I’m sorry. And I hope you will make my punishment as quick and painless as possible.’

‘Punish...?’ The Doctor looked from Erisa to the Master in confusion. ‘Is there something I ought to know?’

Erisa continued to look at the floor. ‘Your presence here is impossible. The existence of this place is known by none save for those who were here before. So I can only assume you are powerful beings who have come to punish us for our hubris.’

The Master stared at the back of one gloved hand. ‘That would be pretty on-brand, to be fair.’

‘No,’ the Doctor cut him off through gritted teeth, then softened his voice. ‘No, Erisa. We aren’t here to punish you, or spy on you. We aren’t angry at you, either. We’re just interested passers-by.’ He brightened. ‘Actually, we’re quite curious about your work.’

Erisa shied away.

‘Curious in the good way,’ the Doctor added hurriedly. ‘We’d like to see some of your experiments, if you don’t mind.’

‘There is only one,’ she said hesitantly. ‘And if you have found your way to *Avalon Gamma*, you surely know what it is.’

‘Yes, we do.’ The Master’s voice had also softened, the Doctor noticed. But in this body, even the most genuine attempt at gentleness came off sounding weaselly. ‘We also know – ah, we *thought* we knew – that the research was abandoned. But it looks like that’s not the case.’

The Doctor peered at the Master. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, look at her.’ The Master gestured to Erisa. ‘She says she was here ‘with the others.’ How long ago was that, honey?’

Erisa gestured to the nearest wall, and the Doctor could see it was covered with tidy little hash marks... more than he could count at a glance.

‘I stopped after a while,’ she admitted. ‘After about thirty years, there seemed to be no point.’

‘But...’ The Doctor stared at Erisa. She looked to be late teens, at best – not even born when the previous crew was here, much less one of the scientists.

Unless...

‘They did it,’ he whispered.

Erisa lowered her eyes again, nodding. ‘It was a success... and I’m the proof. That’s why I was left behind.’ Then she looked up again, grinning suddenly. ‘Tea?’

‘You don’t remember her, you say.’ The Doctor leaned against one of the innumerable crates, sipping at the tea Erisa had made. It tasted more of bag than tea, but he couldn’t bring himself to put it aside. Once she’d gotten past the initial shock of being found, all she wanted was to socialise. He could hardly blame her. Despite her cheerful insinuations that the station’s vast collection of videos had kept her entertained, he could only imagine that human – well, ‘human’ – contact after so long was a welcome relief.

‘She wasn’t in the group I met, no.’ The Master had opted for coffee and seemed to have an equal number of regrets. ‘That doesn’t mean anything, though. I was kept well away from the majority of the residents. They might have seen my assistance as a cheat.’

‘It is a cheat,’ the Doctor murmured into his tea. ‘*And* it could have changed the course of human history. They were right to abandon this place.’

‘Don’t go all moral on me now, Doctor. This benefits both of us, remember? Besides...’ The Master winced as he sipped at his coffee. ‘Besides. It’s my blood, yeah? So anything they did with it pretty much belongs to me. Ah, to *us*.’

Yes, theoretically. *Theoretically*. Well, slightly *less* theoretically, now. Proof that this magical serum had worked on a human was walking around in front of them, happily going through a supply crate looking for tea cakes. Abandoned, left to her own devices. Left for a pair of dying not-so-immortals to shake down for information. She never asked for any of this. But here they were.

In any other situation, the Doctor would simply have whisked her away on the TARDIS and taken her somewhere nicer. Better. Maybe after a few adventures,

just to give her some excitement after her long solitude. She might not even want this life – and maybe he could take her to someone who could fix that for her, undo what was done to her, let her live and die like a human, with other humans to grow close to. That would be the story on literally any other day, but now...

‘You’re getting that look.’

The Doctor looked over at the Master defensively. ‘I haven’t got a look. What look? *You’ve* got a look.’

‘That ‘Oh no, I’ve started contemplating the moral implications of the situation’ look.’

‘Ah, yes. That occasionally happens when I start contemplating the moral implications of a situation.’

‘See, you need to just not do that.’ The Master grinned, crumpling up his now-empty coffee cup. ‘That’s always been your weak spot: you stop and think about consequences for people who aren’t you.’

‘Let’s pretend,’ the Doctor said, as evenly as possible, ‘let’s *pretend* we can alter this serum to work for us. What does it mean if Time Lords can just go about topping up their regenerations willy-nilly?’

‘I won’t tell if you won’t.’

‘You’re having problems.’

The interjection caught both the Doctor and the Master off guard. Erisa had dipped her head into their line of sight, thick braids bobbing in front of her. Any fear she’d exhibited a few minutes prior seemed to have disappeared completely.

The Doctor threw on his gentlest smile. ‘No, of course not–’

‘We need that serum,’ the Master interjected flatly.

Erisa didn’t seem at all surprised. ‘Well, I’d imagine so.’

‘What?’ The Doctor looked between them.

‘Well,’ Erisa went on smoothly, gliding into the conversation with surprising ease. ‘You’re here, yes? You knew where the station was and you got in. You’re being extremely nice to me. And you’re both a bit. Well. Perturbed. I can only imagine you’re here for what was being made.’

‘Quite.’ The Master nodded approvingly.

Erisa gestured to herself. ‘And now you have proof that it works. So, obviously...’

The Doctor peered at Erisa, bemused. Her whole personality seemed to have flipped, first from cowed to cheerful, then from cheerful to... this. There was no trigger that he could recall. It was uncanny and, more than that, unsettling. It gave him pause – though not the reason for said pause. Not just yet, anyway.

‘I’m not here to question your Why,’ Erisa pushed on. ‘For all I know, it could be completely noble reasons. Saving a family, stopping a plague. Or maybe you’re going to inject yourselves with it and run around the galaxy being irresponsible immortals.’

The Master waved a hand. ‘Way ahead of you there, sweetie.’

‘I’m *begging* you to ignore him, Erisa.’

Erisa apparently had chosen to ignore both of them. ‘Under the circumstances,’ she went on coolly, ‘I think we can help each other out. I’ll give you what you want, no questions asked, if you get me off this ship.’

‘Deal.’

The blurt was straight from the Doctor. Even the Master was surprised, his eyes wide behind his mirrored shades. ‘Slow down there. Don’t you wanna negotiate, or ask what the catch is? Check to see she’s not going to screw us over?’

‘Oh, I’m sure she’s fine. Besides, I’m sure she could use the company. Being alone for too long does things to a person.’ The Doctor drained the last of his terrible tea and put the cup aside, clapping his hands together and rubbing them enthusiastically. ‘So. Erisa. What say you give us the penny tour on the way to our destination?’

Erisa was more than happy to oblige and trotted off ahead of them. The Master grabbed the Doctor by the shoulder. ‘Don’t we have other things to do?’

‘We’ll have plenty of time, surely.’ The Doctor shook off the Master’s grip and sauntered after Erisa into the low-gravity hallway.

Erisa’s trajectory through the station led them down an unexpected path. The Doctor had assumed they’d be led down main hallways and through hissing double doors. But as soon as they had reached the first crossroads in the hallways, their guide flipped up, tapping a grate in the ceiling gently with one booted toe. A corner dislodged just enough to reveal a finger’s width of open space, which Erisa floated up and used to pry the vent cover the rest of the way off.

‘Funny way to get around your own home,’ the Master mused.

‘*Fun* way, more like.’ The Doctor grinned as Erisa disappeared into the vent, her thick braids clearing the sides of her face and waving around her. He floated up after her, eyes locked on her, limbs sticking every which way as he attempted

to steer himself. 'The TARDIS is always coming up with new routes. Keeps the boredom—'

The Master rolled his eyes. 'Yeah, yeah, I know. Your girlfriend's so great.' He pushed a hand against the Doctor's face, jetting past him. The Doctor grabbed on to the leather jacket just ahead of him, once again regaining the middle of the marching order – but only after some awkward mid-air scrambling.

There still wasn't much gravity up here, and just enough space in the vent that a hand or foot wrong could lead to a nasty bump on the head. Erisa shot through the vent like a fish through an underwater tunnel, only needing the occasional tap of the foot to keep propelling herself forward. The Doctor followed behind, palms and soles flat against the sides of the vent, speeding after her like a tweedy spider up a water-spout.

The Master had spread himself out as wide as he could, trying and failing to crawl along the vent as though gravity were intact. 'Come out to the coast,' he muttered, 'we'll get together, have a few laughs...'

'This was your idea,' the Doctor shot back, executing an unexpectedly graceful spin as he regained his grip on the shiny metal walls. 'Can't even be happy when you get your way, can you?'

Erisa popped them through a handful of rooms, some of which they only saw through the ceiling vent. Bunks, a rec room, a dusty movie theatre, and a fully kitted out arcade awaited them through their ceiling vantage points.

'This is all just... *really* fascinating.' The Master rubbed the back of his head after another accidental rap against the vent walls. 'But is it really getting us anywhere?'

'I don't know,' the Doctor said softly, spinning down the passage idly after their tour guide. 'I think it's been very informative.'

'Almost there,' Erisa called back to the pair. 'Get ready for a drop, the gravity's on in this room.' She paused a few feet farther ahead, lifted aside another grate, and dropped into the room below. The Doctor followed, hanging by his fingertips for a few seconds to gauge how much of a pain the drop would be on his ankles. But the Master pried his fingers loose, sending the Doctor slumping to the floor like an annoyed scarecrow.

'Here we are!' Erisa said brightly.

'And where,' the Master asked tersely, adjusting his gloves, 'is 'here'?'

Erisa spread her arms wide, and the Doctor fancied he saw a little of his own showman's flair in the move. Or was it the Master's? The either/or'ness of it

distressed him. ‘The record room. This is where everyone did their debriefings at the end of the day. Anything you could ever hope to know about the ship will be here.’

The Doctor took a slow walk around the room, running his hand over the various screens and racks. There was very little by way of physical record-keeping, which was (at least in this case) a bonus. The downside of electric over acoustic was the ease of tampering and theft. Any coded safeguard could be busted through by a sufficiently skilled hacker; and on the off chance there wasn’t a sufficiently skilled hacker nearby, there was generally still a way to off-load whatever was required and take it to someone who could crack it. Hard copies ran the risk of deteriorating over time unless they were in a sealed room, though.

‘No worries about this stuff being shot back to the wrong people?’ the Master asked, also observing the setup.

‘Or the *right* people?’ the Doctor amended.

Erisa shook her head. ‘This entire place is off the grid. The crew fudged a communications malfunction two weeks into the mission. While Ground Control fussed themselves trying to get it fixed, the crew up here worked away in peace. Which makes it all the more interesting how the pair of you made your way here.’

She was fixing them not with a look of criticism, but of bright-eyed fascination. The Doctor knew it well.

‘Yes,’ he said, sidling up to her, ‘and well you might ask. Bruce, would you mind doing the honours while I chat with our new friend?’

The Master bared his teeth at the pair of them, but grudgingly turned his head back toward the wall full of instruments and shelving. He wiggled his gloved fingers thoughtfully over the panels, finally choosing a place to start.

The room was not as small as the Doctor had first imagined. Rounding a wall of deactivated cameras and push-buttons revealed a wider space. More walls, more shelves, more computers. And in a far corner, what looked to be a walled-off recording booth. The Doctor inclined his head toward it, and Erisa followed unquestioningly.

‘I expect you’ll want the door closed,’ she said, her voice tinged with suspicion. ‘You’ve got that look in your eye.’

‘What look?’

‘The ‘we’ve got a secret’ look.’

At this point, anything more Erisa said was just gravy on top of the Doctor’s

clever discovery roast. Wait, that was a terrible metaphor. But the point stood. He reached over Erisa's shoulder – easy, given their comparative height – and pushed the door closed.

‘I think we both know what you really are.’ His tone was even and harmless. Because his thoughts were, at least for now, even and harmless. It really mattered how things spun out from here: what the upshot of his realisation was, and what it meant for their current situation.

‘I don't know what you mean,’ Erisa said, and her tone was just as even and harmless. Pitch perfect. To the inflection. Of course.

The Doctor gestured to her face. ‘Move your hair.’

She lifted one thick, blue-green braid over her shoulder, from front to back. There it was: what he thought he'd seen as she drifted up to the vent when she began their tour of the ship. Teal markings, like veins traced across her skin, leading from her ear down the side of her neck. They would end at her chest, over her heart; he knew without needing to see. And, under the braid on the other side, would be a matching set.

‘Tomokar.’ The Doctor smiled a little. ‘I've met a few of you before, but it's been a long time. A *very* long time. I'm surprised to see you as part of an organised crew. Usually your people prefer to operate alone.’

Erisa smiled. She seemed almost pleased to be found out. ‘Can you blame us? When you're a weapons-grade empath, working in a group puts you in a muddle.’

‘Exactly my point.’

Tomokar – there were so few of them compared to most races in the universe, it was rare to ever meet *any*. The Doctor had now met three across four times as many lifetimes. He lost his shirt to one at high-stakes Old Maid (his own fault for not realising how well she could read him). Another had had a promising career in beat poetry cut short by the sheer amount of emotion he invoked in his audience, and had to move to streaming from an insulated studio. But he'd never yet met one who voluntarily worked with several dozen people at a time.

They weren't a race so much as a large project: genetically-enhanced volunteers from one of five planets, each in constant wars (hot and cold) with the other four. Where others might have created super soldiers, a coalition of scientists recruited subjects with a certain level of psychic energy to create super negotiators. The plan wasn't the worst, and most subjects were enthusiastic about it.

But it worked *too* well. The Tomokar were able to broker peace among worlds,

shifting easily into the mindsets of whomever they approached and facilitating resolution with no further bloodshed. But... then what? There was no way to shut it off, and there was no need for their very specific skill set once they'd made themselves obsolete. Moreover, it became apparent that talking to multiple people at once was akin to giving themselves an identity disorder, as they juggled all the inputs. Those who didn't go into complete isolation found ways to use the ability to their advantage in solo dealings. Some for better, some for worse. As the Doctor himself had seen.

Perhaps she'd been the ship's therapist, only meeting people one at a time? That might explain why the Master had never met her. Even so...

'The two of you are a relief, really,' Erisa went on, bringing the Doctor's thoughts back around to the present. 'I might as well be talking to one person.'

The Doctor winced.

'You don't like that?'

'That's not what we're talking about here.'

Erisa grinned. 'Expert pivot. But go on.'

The Doctor put his hands behind his back, pacing around the tiny recording studio, regarding her like a disobedient student. Her eyes followed him; she didn't appear cowed at all. 'The Tomokar I've met all flew solo. They used that automatic empathy to their advantage. The ultimate code-switch, perfect for one-on-one negotiations. Or performances... Or swindles.'

'Is that an accusation, Doctor?'

He shook his head, rubbing his chin. 'I don't know yet. I'm still figuring that bit out. You're more than welcome to enlighten me and save me some time.'

'First, tell me why you're here. What do you want with that research? Why do you need immortality?'

The Doctor weighed his words.

So, the Doctor had taken the girl to talk in private. That was always going to happen at some point, of course. Time for the Real Hero to have a heart-to-heart with the guest cast while whoever was left got on with the difficult work.

Fortunately for the Master, the work wasn't actually difficult at all. Considering there was no possibility of outside interference, not much effort had been put toward security. All fifty crewpersons were in on the shared secret of *Avalon Gamma's* research. A fifty-way standoff. There wasn't a lot of point in

protecting data from each other in this sealed-off little capsule.

If anything, the hard part would be in shuffling through it all. Fifty video diaries a day for three years. What he was looking for would likely be near the end, if what Erisa said held any merit. He could, if nothing else, narrow his search to everything after his past self's arrival. He looked in a nearby drawer of loose equipment, found a pair of chrome earbuds, and synced them up to the playback panel.

The video files were stored unpleasantly chaotically. There were nested directories, but they were sets of numbers of symbols that likely only meant anything to the crew. It wasn't impossible to trawl through, just annoying. He considered taking a few minutes to tidy up the names of the various files and folders... but no, that wasn't what they were there for.

A simple voice recognition system allowed him to narrow down the video diaries even further by keyword. He punched in 'success,' 'serum', and 'Erisa' as search terms and began scrubbing through the results. Erisa's name popped up in all the places it ought to have... but so did other things.

The Master chuckled a little to himself. 'I see.' He squeezed his right hand over his left wrist as he continued to watch. 'So that's how it is, huh? What a disappointment.' Though, disappointment aside, he couldn't help grinning. It annoyed him, sure... but how much it would also annoy the Doctor *more* than made up for it.

'It's that important, huh?' Erisa had an imperious look in her eye, cold and judgmental, a look the Doctor himself had practiced for his most difficult and emotionally contentious stare-downs. He felt odd under it. Odd and squirmy. *So that's what this feels like.* 'You, Doctor, stand between this universe and utter destruction. To the point that it literally cannot live without you. To the point that you'd join forces with someone you hate so much—'

'I don't *hate* him,' the Doctor said grudgingly, if only because he wanted something to be contrary about.

'... and come to retrieve research that you yourself openly profess isn't right.'

The Doctor tried to throw the imperious stare back. It was his first, after all. He'd honed it for hundreds of years, he'd thrown it at gods and monsters. Erisa wasn't allowed to master it so quickly. That wasn't all right. 'I never claimed my methods were pleasant. I do what needs to be done.'

Erisa's gaze softened into a smile. Where had she gotten that from? That was even worse than the stolen glare. 'By whose authority, Doctor?'

'Doctor?' The Master's voice was harsh and angular against Erisa's suddenly soft tones, but infinitely more welcoming. The Doctor slid past Erisa and met the other Time Lord out in the record room.

'She's a Tomokar,' the Doctor said.

'Yes, I know. Well, I assumed.'

'Pretty sure I knew it first.'

The Master smiled at Erisa. 'He's clearly feeling out of his depth. He gets tetchy.'

'I do not,' the Doctor grumbled.

The Master waved the pair over to the large screen on the other side of the record room. 'You know, I was curious about you, Erisa. A lot of things about you.'

'Such as?' She didn't seem at all put out. She was matching the Master sly smile for sly smile, passive-aggressive tone for passive-aggressive tone. But unlike the Doctor when met with his own attitude, the Master appeared unfazed.

'Such as... why didn't I see you when I was first here?' He held up a hand. 'Yes, yes, I was here before. You wouldn't have recognised me. But I would have seen you, almost certainly. And yet, I never did. I let it go, of course – given your, er, specific circumstances, which I'd suspected, you would likely keep to yourself.'

'But there was something else that bothered me.'

The Doctor cut in. 'Why experiment on an already modified subject?'

The Master tapped his nose with a gloved finger. 'Exactly. It seems counterintuitive, doesn't it? For something at this level, you'd want as clean a slate as possible. Now, I'm not fully versed in Tomokar genetics, but I do know that anything even slightly off the norm would be useless in research. If the serum worked for you, why drop everything and bolt like they'd just offended the gods? Working on you doesn't mean it'd work on untreated humans.'

Erisa nodded. 'That's fair.'

'And?' the Master pressed. But Erisa gave no answer.

'You've brought a film,' the Doctor said impatiently, motioning to the screen. 'Shouldn't we be watching?'

'Ah, yes.' The Master picked up the screen's little controller. 'So, I did some digging, and I did indeed find the intel we need.' He hit a button, but nothing showed on the screen except for the file's name, date, and a few strings of

numbers. The Doctor squinted at the screen, then realised the Master and Erisa were looking in an entirely different direction.

A few feet away, in the space that led to the rest of the record room, shone a life-sized hologram of a woman. She was in perhaps her thirties, with dark hair hanging in long waves around her face and the same tidy jumpsuit Erisa wore. The holographic woman perched on a holographic stool, as if telling her woes to holographic Big Brother. Another button click, and she sprang to life.

'The visitor's DNA is indeed unique.' The hologram's voice came from a speaker above the projector, tinny and distant. *'I'm not sure what we can do with it, but it does introduce some surprising possibilities. Arwin is still running tests, and we hope to have more information in a few days. Depending on what he finds, we may be able to test the serum on one of our animal subjects within the next two weeks.'*

The woman began glitching and fizzing in and out of view, and the Doctor realised the Master was skipping through to the next relevant clip. 'Who is she?' the Doctor asked Erisa, pointing to the image of the woman.

Erisa frowned, but didn't answer.

'You would have known everyone on this station,' the Doctor pressed, 'and she sounds as though she's playing a major role in all this, if not leading the experiment outright.'

Still no answer.

'You were the test subject!' The Doctor felt his nerves frazzling. He pulled himself back. Calm, gentle. If he went off, so would the Tomokar. 'Are you sure you've never seen her before? Could someone else have been a go-between?'

There was a strange, hollow cough from behind them, and the Doctor realised the hologram was rolling again. The woman was back, coughing into her left sleeve as she began another video diary.

'I think we've gotten as far as we're going to get without practical testing,' the woman said, her voice slightly raspy. *'Under the circumstances, with no willing volunteers handy, I've elected to test the serum myself.'* She hesitated, looking down at her sleeve. *'I haven't injected the first dose yet, this is something else. You know. Let the record show.'*

More fast-forwarding, and the Doctor noticed Erisa's head lowering, her thick braids closing in on either side of her face even more.

'Erisa,' he said, as gently as he possibly could, because he felt every nerve starting to fizz like a circuit breaker about to blow. 'Erisa, tell me. Be truthful with me.'

She stared ahead at nothing, and the Doctor could see she was no longer registering his word, his moods. She looked lost, confused. Her lips moved, but didn't form words.

'This woman says she's the test subject. That isn't you.' He stopped, a hand travelling to his mouth thoughtfully. No. No, it couldn't be. It would be disastrous. It would upend the natural order. But for *him*...

'Whatcha thinkin', Doctor?' The Master's voice was dripping with amusement.

The Doctor pointed to the glitching hologram of the woman as the Master continued to scrub through to his next clip. His eyes were locked on Erisa's face, his insides an unpleasant mix of dread and hope. 'Is that... you?'

Was that what had happened here? Had this little team, cut off from everything, with the blood of a renegade Time Lord at their disposal, inadvertently cracked the secret of regeneration? Was that why this place had fallen apart? Why Erisa had been left behind?

'A Tomokar Time Lord,' the Master chuckled. 'Man, can you imagine? That would drive you crazy.' As if to accentuate his point, he paused at another point in the holographic video. The woman had swept her hair back over her shoulders, and the name — ERISA — was visible on her jumpsuit.

But Erisa, the Erisa sat next to the Doctor just shook her head. 'I got lonely,' she said quietly.

Before the Doctor could ask what she meant, the Master started up the next video. Erisa – the holographic Erisa – was gone. In her place sat a tall, weary-looking man, the name ARWIN visible on his standard-issue jumpsuit.

'It's not customary to share logs, but... someone has to finish out Erisa's.' He wiped a hand over his face, clearly exhausted. *'The serum worked. Erisa was. Revitalised. Better than we'd seen her in years. Better than she'd felt in years. We each took our turn. All 50 of us have gotten the full three-course dose.'*

'I watched the videos,' Erisa said quietly. 'All the videos.'

She'd said she'd watched hours and hours of video to keep herself from being lonely. But the tour. The movie theatre lay dusty and untouched. Then the hours of video she'd had access to were...

The fizzling in the Doctor's nerves began to die out. As he listened on, the bleak reality of the entire exercise hit him.

'Every day, the human body replaces more than 50 billion of its own cells,' Arwin went on, and the Doctor could see that his exhaustion was more than just overwork or mental exertion. *'Each cell's lessening ability to replicate itself is*

what leads to aging, and eventually cessation of life. The goal of our experiment had been to circumvent this eventuality, to allow our cells to regenerate indefinitely. We did indeed do that. And now we're watching every potential way that could go horribly, horribly wrong.

'Erisa had been in remission. Six months. The serum doesn't pick and choose. Every cell can regenerate, replicate itself. Every single one. She was dead within a week. Two more of us are on our death beds. They hadn't even been diagnosed. Martine had endometriosis. Stage I. Bearable, she said. Now it's Stage IV, growing in her lungs. All we can do is keep her comfortable.

'The good results were immediate; the monkey's paw curled up more slowly than we were willing to wait for. Old illnesses, new and undiscovered ones, or just our own bodies unable to maintain the energy necessary to renew themselves at the rate at which they were operating.' Arwin smiled, and it was almost wistful. *'There won't be a single one of us left before long. Maybe this is punishment for our hubris: wipe us and our experiment from the face of the universe, but not before making sure we suffer first.'*

The Doctor grabbed the remote from the Master and jammed the buttons until the hologram winked out. Then he flung the little instrument against the wall and knelt in front of the Tomokar. 'Why did you tell us you were Erisa!?'

'Calm down.' The Master put a hand on the Doctor's shoulder, but he swatted it away.

'Don't tell me to calm down. Not you, of all people.' His attention was back on the girl, not angry, but tired, as tired as the holographic Arwin they'd just finished listening to. 'Why did you lie to us?'

'Being lonely does funny things to a person.' The Tomokar's own voice cracked, and the Doctor couldn't tell if she was mirroring him or just as tired.

The Master tutted. 'So what is it, kid? Smuggler? Hitchhiker?'

'I was kicked off a cargo vessel two months ago. Just had the suit on my back and one propellant tank. They didn't care if I died, they just wanted to alleviate their guilt by giving me a fighting chance.'

'And dropped you in the middle of nowhere,' the Master mused. 'Exactly where this shady research was going on.' Now *he* was doing the explanatory pacing, and the Doctor was just too exhausted to argue that that was his thing. He got to be the genius and put the pieces together. He didn't care, not this time.

'Had the whole run of the place. Well, most of it.'

The Master pointed up toward the open vent. 'Hence your way of getting around, I'm guessing? What was it, retinal scans? Hand prints? Ah, doesn't

matter. Guessing you found this place and marathoned the holograms. Perfect Tomokar entertainment. One person at a time, they can't answer back, you can talk to them however you want.'

The Doctor stared at the floor, his voice muffled against his hands. 'But you absorbed it. You started believing it.'

The Master chuckled. 'You were never supposed to be here at all, were you, kid?'

The Tomokar opened her mouth, but any words were halted by the Doctor's next moves. He climbed up on the nearest table and pulled himself up into the vent, pushing himself down the low-gravity passage at high speed.

'Hey!' The Master climbed up after him, bumbling his way through the vent in pursuit. 'Where the hell are you going?!'

'The records said it didn't work for humans.' The Doctor's voice was a growl, echoing backwards down the vent. 'It didn't say a thing about *us*.'

He eventually tumbled out into the laboratory, which their guide had indicated briefly earlier. Unaware of the other two bringing up the rear, he began shuffling through the drawers, the cabinets, anything that could be opened or looked into.

'Give it a rest, Doctor.' The Master dropped down into the lab. 'You missed it thanks to your little tantrum, but Arwin says they destroyed all their research. And the samples.'

The Doctor spun around, eyes wide, fingers digging into his hair. 'Then the diaries! One of them will have mentioned the formula!'

The Master shook his head, gesturing to the girl next to him. 'If they had, she'd remember it. Face it, we struck out. I tried.'

'Everything is gone,' the Tomokar confirmed, her personality having thankfully latched on to the Master's calmer tones. 'They didn't want their work replicated by anyone. They didn't want to take any more lives.'

The Doctor stared at the girl. 'You lied to me. You lied right to my face when I told you what was at stake.'

'I didn't promise you anything,' she said quietly.

'You could have *said* there was nothing. Why didn't you?'

She smiled sadly. 'I could feel how much it would hurt you.'

The Doctor continued to stare in disbelief. He didn't even feel the Master's hand clap him on one shoulder.

'Well, it's been fun catching up. But if there's nothing here for me, I've gotta dash.' The Master slid his hand off the Doctor's shoulder and pushed back one sleeve of his leather jacket. 'See, what did I tell you? Good ol' bodysnatching.'

Lots more reliable.'

'You're taking this awfully well.' The words were the Doctor's, but the voice was the Tomokar's. She said them for him, for which he was grateful. He was too much of a muddle of emotions. He didn't want to unknot any of them, for fear of what he might find when he did.

The Master shrugged. 'Not a lot to lose. I've been through this before. *Him*, though...' He began tinkering with an instrument strapped to his wrist. 'Ah, well. I did say it was a fact-finding mission. I've found my facts, so I can leave with a clear conscience.'

The Doctor peered past the girl at the device. 'A vortex manipulator. Who gave you one of those?'

'We have to have *some* secrets.' The Master grinned. 'It's a shame. Struck out on the serum, but got an eyeful of how you get when you're desperate.'

'What?'

'Don't worry about it.' The Master began punching buttons on the little device.

'No.' The Doctor pushed past the girl, grabbing the Master's arm. 'You knew. You knew it would be a dead end, didn't you? You knew the whole time.'

'Eeeeh.' A one-shouldered shrug. 'The girl was a surprise, I'll admit. But otherwise...'

The Doctor squeezed tighter on the leather jacket. 'What was all this, then? A sick joke? A taunt? Or just trying to show me I'm no better than you?'

'Oh, Doctor.' The Master grinned. There it was again, that 80s movie villain grin. He spread his hands wide. 'We *both* know you're no better than me. You're no more special, you're no more noble, you're no more magical. You know how we know that? It's not because you're drooling for five more seconds of immortality. It's not even because you're terrorising some poor lost kid.'

And here, the Master lowered his sunglasses, his snakelike eyes boring directly into the Doctor as his grin got just a little too large for comfort. 'It's because if I had any reason to believe otherwise, I would burn everything around you to the ground, just to even the score. And I don't smell smoke. Do you?'

The Doctor clenched his jaw as the Master leaned away, still grinning. He pulled his sunglasses back up over his eyes and went back to his vortex manipulator. 'I'd better report back. I'd get a little more used to disappointment, if I were you. You've got a lot of pent-up rage there. It'd be a shame if someone were to, I dunno. Exploit the hell out of it for fun.'

And the Master shimmered out of *Avalon Gamma*, cackling into the timestream.

Her real name was Niv, and she really was only eighteen. She'd entered the Tomokar program four years ago, done her bit for king and planet, and then attempted to ship off to a planet where she could start over. The crew of the cargo ship she'd hitched a ride on thought she was doing impressions of them all – and she cut so close to the quick, they dumped her out to find her own living situation. A few months later, she'd acclimatised herself to *Avalon Gamma* thanks to repeat viewings of the logs.

And now, she was sitting in a comfy armchair on the TARDIS, wrapped in a blanket and being served tea (real tea, not cardboardy rationed stuff) by an awkwardly handsome young man who'd been ready to tear her head off five minutes prior. It was clearly meant as the introductory bars of an apology.

She'd seen into both of the strangers' minds, at least to some degree. There was too much there for her to sift through at length. But she saw them clearly, opposite and yet identical. Both desperate to cling to life after having lived a dozen of them. Somewhere in her embellished emotions, Niv could understand. But in *her* mind, the thought of living so long, of being so tired, of carrying so much personal responsibility? It didn't seem at all like the sort of thing she'd want to extend.

'I can drop you wherever you like,' the Doctor said. 'Wherever it was you were planning on going. Bip, bop, blink of an eye.'

The loneliness that radiated out of him didn't even require her heightened emotions to parse. 'Doesn't have to be the blink of an eye.'

'Oh. I rather think it does.'

Niv held the warm teacup to her cheek. 'Maybe. I could comparison shop a little. You could show me around some places you think I'd like.'

The Doctor puffed out his cheeks, blowing out his breath in an exhausted raspberry. 'Oh, fine. For you.' A sad smile lit his face for a moment.

Something was tailing this man, and she neither had nor desired the mental scope to see what it was. But it lingered dark over him, and darker still after he'd come to *Avalon Gamma*. She'd have to be gone before whatever it was came for him; she had no role in those intricacies to come. But, for the Doctor's sake, she hoped there would be someone with him.

And, for everyone's sake, she prayed it wouldn't be Bruce.

Merlin's Dragon

Stephen Hatcher

As soon as he awoke, he knew it was late. The beams of summer sunlight that penetrated the woven walls of the hut and the sounds of the town beyond told him that. Slowly and painfully, he opened his eyes and took in his surroundings. Where was he? More to the point, who was he? He moved his head and groaned at the pain. Now he was remembering his name, or at least the name by which he was known. It had been so long since he had heard his true name, spoken in the mellifluous tongue of his own people. Wistfully, he realised that he would never speak that language now. It had been so long, and he had been so young. Even so, the harsh sounds of these mammals, these humans, still felt strange in his mouth.

He was fully awake now and as he sat up in his bed, the events of the previous night came back to him. He groaned again and felt his aching head. He hadn't stood a chance against them and now escape was impossible.

He had scarcely managed to struggle into his tunic and trousers when he heard the sound of approaching voices. They were coming to claim the spoils of their victory. The young reptile drew himself up to his full height and awaited the worst.

In a rush, the two figures entered the hut and grabbed him by the arms. 'Come along Draco, you're not going to skulk in here all morning,' said the first, pulling him towards the door.

'Yes, come on.' The second man took Draco's other arm. 'We beat you fair and square... and no, the dice were not loaded. Now it's time to pay up. Breakfast's on you.'

Draco laughed and shook his two friends off as they emerged into the bright sunlight. 'Alright, you two, I know. I'm coming. It was quite a night, wasn't it?'

He smiled at the two young humans, his best friends in the world. They were both so different to him and yet each of the three understood the others completely.

Laughing, Draco, Oclinos and Maccus set off towards the tavern. It was late, but Draco had no doubt that they would still be able to find something for breakfast, and despite their best efforts of the previous night, he was sure that the supplies of ale hadn't been entirely exhausted yet. As they crossed the forum a tall, imposing figure stepped out in front of them. It was Maccus's father

Cunorix, Captain of the Guard. At almost seventeen, Maccus was by two years the oldest of the three friends and was increasingly expected to take on some of the duties of an adult.

Cunorix spoke in a tone that was firm but not unkindly, 'Off to the tavern, are we? I would have thought you might have had more than enough of that last night.'

The friends smiled at the captain without comment.

'Well, I'm afraid it will have to wait,' he continued. 'There is a council meeting. The chief wants everyone to be there.'

Draco and Oclinos each gave Maccus a commiserating look and began to continue towards the tavern, leaving their friend to his duties. 'See you later then, Maccus. Join us when you're free.'

'Not so fast, you two.' Cunorix interrupted their escape. 'I said everyone. That includes you Draco. And you might as well come along too, Oclinos.'

The pair halted and, with smiles of resignation, turned and joined Maccus in following his father towards the hall of the Chief.

'Are you not joining the council meeting, Master?' Essa, youngest daughter of Gavo the chieftain, approached the black-robed figure from behind. Arlodh did not turn to greet the girl. He remained hidden in the shadows next to a half-opened doorway, his attention firmly on the elders of the town entering the main chamber of the hall of the chief.

'No child, not today. Today we watch and we listen; we learn, and we make plans.' His soft voice dripped with honey and menace. 'Ah, there he is, the Dragon; so young; and so special. If only Gavo knew what he has brought into his court. If only he knew.' A thought seemed to occur to him. He turned his head sharply to face the girl directly, 'But Essa, quickly tell me. You have been keeping your ears open for me. What have you learned?' His eyes seemed to burn with the brightest of lights. Essa felt herself transfixed. She simply had to tell Arlodh everything she knew.

'The Romans, Master; the last legion will leave today. It is said they will not return.'

Arlodh nodded and spoke more to himself than to Essa, 'Indeed yes that is true, they will not. This is a turning point in the history of these islands. To all intents and purposes, Roman Britain ends today. What else do they say?'

‘There was a Saxon raid yesterday, no more than twenty miles from here. They are getting bolder. Once the Romans have gone, we will be at their mercy.’

Arlodh clicked his tongue impatiently, ‘Yes, yes, I know this. But what other news have you heard? Is there any word of the sorcerer?’

‘They say he is coming, Master. They say that Merlin himself will save us. It has been foretold.’

‘Do they say when, Essa?’ Arlodh’s tone was urgent.

‘No Master, but soon. He passed through Aquae Sulis two days ago.’

Arlodh said nothing. He stroked his trim black beard in thought for a moment, then turned again to spy on the gathering in the hall. Once he had looked away from her, Essa felt as if she had woken from a deep sleep. It took her a moment to remember where she was. She knew that she and her master had been talking, but of the conversation itself, she had no memory.

Draco watched from the back of the hall as Gavo took his seat and looked out over the assembled leaders of his people. To his right sat the Roman general Constantinus and the monk Paulinus, while the seat to his left remained empty. Draco wondered briefly where the chief’s new advisor Arlodh was hiding, but he didn’t have long to ponder the question before the excited chattering died down in anticipation as Gavo rose to his feet and began to speak.

‘My people, the day has finally come. Today, our friend General Constantinus will lead the last of his legions from these shores. After today, we can no longer rely on the protection of Rome. Even as we speak, Saxon raiders are attacking our neighbours. It is only a matter of time before they attack us. As you know, all the towns along this coast have petitioned the Emperor, begging him to continue to defend us. My friends, I have his reply here.’

Draco saw the chief pick up a scroll of parchment from the table in front of him and pass it to Paulinus, who at Gavo’s signal began to read aloud.

‘Fight bravely and defend your lives. You are on your own.’

A shocked intake of breath went around the hall. Draco noticed that Constantinus was looking decidedly embarrassed.

Gavo continued, ‘Well, there we have it. We are abandoned.’ He turned to the general. ‘Constantinus, please be assured that we do not blame you for this development. You have been a good friend to us; and you have kept us safe for many years; but you have your orders. Your next battle will be far from here.’

You go with our best wishes and our blessings.'

The general stood and clasped the chief in a warm embrace.

Gavo continued, 'We are luckier than most of the towns along this coast. At least we have the strong walls of Portus Adurni, which will keep us safe for a while. But more and more of these invaders will arrive. We must be prepared to defend ourselves as a free town – a kingdom in our own right. Therefore, the elders of Portus Adurni have asked me to assume the responsibilities of your king. I have accepted their request.'

A loud cheer went around the hall. Gavo continued, 'As my first act as King, I have appointed the Captain of the town guard, Cunorix, to be the general of our army. Together he and I will organise our defence and I am in no doubt that we will see off these Saxon invaders.' This was greeted with another cheer. 'But for now, go back to your homes and your families. Enjoy today. Let us bid a fond farewell to our Roman friends, but then we must stand ready to defend ourselves.'

The men began to file out of the hall. As Draco turned to go, he heard a voice call his name. 'Draco, my Dragon.' He turned and saw the new King coming towards him. 'Will you be singing for us by the quayside when the legions leave? I do hope so.'

'Certainly, My Lord. It will be a pleasure,' he smiled.

'Thank you, Draco. More importantly, you have always brought me luck. I hope you will continue to do so. I feel we are going to need all the good fortune we can get.'

Draco bowed slightly to the King, who swept away in deep conversation with General Cunorix.

'I don't know what he expects me to do,' confided Draco to Oclinos.

'You don't have to do anything. Just be lucky.'

By late afternoon, a large crowd had gathered at the harbour to watch the last cohort leave. Everything had been prepared over the preceding days, so when it came to the moment, it was all over quite quickly. As Draco played his harp and sang a song of goodbyes of which he was particularly proud, the last of the troops, their families and followers boarded the squadron of ships; Gavo and Constantinus bade each other farewell and the ships set sail. Then everyone simply dispersed. It had probably been the most significant historic moment in

all of their lives, but no one appeared to want to stand around and discuss the matter. Draco smiled his thanks to the small number of people who offered their congratulations on his performance, then returned to his house to rest.

Draco had only been home for a matter of minutes when his visitor arrived. He had been sitting playing with his harp, thinking about putting together some ideas for a new song, when a shadow appeared in the doorway. Draco turned to greet the newcomer and his heart sank. 'Arlodh, what can I do for you?' he asked. Instinctively he had both disliked and mistrusted the King's advisor, from the moment Arlodh had arrived at Portus Adurni only a month earlier. The speed with which he had managed to gain the chief's confidence only made Draco trust him even less.

'May I come in Draco, my dear boy? I've been waiting for an opportunity to talk to you.'

Draco sighed, 'I suppose so. What do you mean, 'opportunity'? You could have talked to me at any time.'

'Yes, but the moment had to be right. Draco, you probably haven't realised this, but you are the reason why I came here to Portus Adurni.'

This surprised Draco. 'I am?'

'Oh, yes. Most definitely. Your fame has spread far and wide. When I heard that there was a young Silurian living here, I knew I had to come and find you.'

This left Draco puzzled, but intrigued. 'A young what? 'Silurian', did you say?'

'Yes, Draco. A Silurian. Of course, you won't have heard that word before. It's not strictly accurate and it's a term coined by a fool, but it will suffice.'

Draco considered this. 'A Silurian? Is that what I am? I was so young when I was found and brought here. I have nothing but the vaguest memories of my own people. Gavo calls me his Dragon.' He smiled briefly, then became serious again. 'But how do you know all of this? What have I got to do with you?'

Arlodh chuckled quietly and coldly. He paused before answering. 'Draco, this particular moment in the history of this planet presents a great opportunity for a man – or a Silurian – who is prepared to seize it. The Romans have gone. There is a power vacuum. Someone needs to fill it. Are you ready to be that someone, Draco? I came here to find that out, only to be greeted by a young Silurian, wasting his time getting drunk, singing songs and playing the harp. You are little more than a court jester – a lucky mascot. But can you be more than that, Draco?'

'But I don't want...'

Arlodh took the boy roughly by his shoulder and dragging him to the door, waved an outstretched arm at the view beyond. 'One day lad, all this will be yours. All that you can see, stretched out over the hills and valleys of this land. That'll be your kingdom.'

The man's intensity alarmed Draco. 'But I don't want any of that,' he protested. 'I'd rather...'

'Rather what?' replied Arlodh sharply.

'I'd rather just sing...'

'Stop that, stop that. Not while I'm here,' spat the man. He pulled the boy around and fixed him with a stare of terrifying ferocity. 'Draco, I am the Master, and you will obey me.'

The young Silurian stood transfixed for moment, unable to speak or move, lost in the depths of Arlodh's gaze. Then as if waking, he shook his head silently.

Arlodh persisted, 'Yes, you will obey me. We will find your people and together we will awaken them. With their might, we will enslave these pathetic humans and rule this world; you and I together, Draco.'

Draco shook his head sadly, broke away from Arlodh's stare and sat down. 'I don't want to enslave anyone,' he said quietly. 'I scarcely remember my people and if you think you can use them in your schemes, then leave me out of it. I'm happy here; I have friends. All I want is a quiet life.'

Arlodh paused for a moment, as if considering what had happened. 'Draco, I will find your people, if necessary, without your help,' he spat. 'For a court jester you have strength but be clear. I am the Master, and I demand obedience.' With that he turned and left the house.

As night fell, the three travellers settled down in their makeshift camp. It was a cold evening on the moors and the night would not be comfortable.

Elim reached over to the pot and helped himself to another plateful of vegetable broth, then resumed his place next to the fire beside Daucus. His thoughts drifted to his home, to his mother and father and his little sister. It had been many months since he had seen her, and it would soon be her fifth birthday. He remembered the day he had left them. He had begged their permission to join the wise man – the sorcerer – to become his apprentice. Tearfully, they had accepted that this was his destiny that even though he was only sixteen, they would have to let him go. He wondered when he would see them again.

But enough of melancholy; he smiled at the comforting thought that this would be their last night under the stars. Tomorrow they would reach Portus Adurni and find warmth and shelter - at least for a while.

He caught Daucus's eye and raised an eyebrow. The old warrior merely shrugged and returned to his own supper but Elim was not content to let things drift. Through the flames he watched the third member of the company, staring intently into the fire, with an unfathomable expression. He called out to him. 'Master!'

At once the little man looked up, suddenly alert, but still distant; and replied in his soft accent, which Elim had once been told was Pictish, 'Yes, you may be right.'

'Master! Master Merlin!'

With a start the wizard seemed to become more aware. He spoke, still softly, but firmly. 'Elim, please. I've asked you not to call me that. Just 'Merlin' will do nicely for now.'

'Yes, Master - I mean Merlin... Sorry!' he apologised. 'You seem worried. Is there some danger that lies ahead of us?'

'Elim, you have no idea. There are so many dangers ahead. Daucus can look after himself, but you are young. Am I being selfish, bringing you with me? I should send you home to your village. I have no right to put you in danger.'

'Master Merlin, I am old enough to make my own choices; and it was I who asked to be your apprentice. My place is with you. Now please, let us talk no more of that.'

Elim fell silent, unwilling to risk further discussion of the point. Daucus, however, took up the interrogation. 'But Merlin, you haven't answered Elim's question. Do you know of any particular danger that awaits us?'

Merlin sighed heavily. 'My friends, you know that we have a purpose in going to Portus Adurni - to investigate the stories of this 'dragon' who is apparently living under the protection of Gavo and to offer the chieftain whatever help we can in his defence against the Saxon raiders. Now, as we are getting closer, I am becoming certain that our journey has another, even more urgent purpose. I can feel a familiar presence - a most unexpected and dangerous one.'

'A presence, Master? What sort of presence?' Elim couldn't resist re-joining the discussion.

'One like me.'

'Another sorcerer, Master?'

'You might say that Elim. You might say that - but one whose intentions are

not benign. In any case, we shall arrive tomorrow and then we shall see. Now, we should sleep. We will need our wits about us.' He pulled his light brown woven coat around him for warmth, checking that all the odd-shaped buttons were fastened; then pulled his small straw hat over his eyes, and lay down on his blanket. He seemed to fall asleep at once.

Elim and Daucus exchanged worried glances, then followed Merlin's example.

'Ah good, Arlodh. There you are. Where have you been? It's late.'

Unseen by the King, Arlodh rolled his eyes in irritation at Gavo's imperious tone. 'I am here, my Lord. I am always ready to serve my King. Is there something wrong?'

Gavo either didn't notice or else ignored the insincerity, 'Wrong? No, nothing new, I suppose; but is it too much to ask my chief advisor to be here to advise me, on such an important day?'

'My Lord, I had much to do in your service, I—'

The King cut him off impatiently. 'Well, never mind that. Now tell me, what news is there of the sorcerer? Is it true he is coming soon?'

'So it is foretold, my Lord.' Arlodh could scarcely keep the irritation from his voice. 'The talk in town is that he may even be here tomorrow.'

'And what are we to make of that, Arlodh, this Merlin of legend? Is his arrival something we can look forward to?'

Arlodh paused before answering. 'I think you should be very careful, mighty King. We are in a very weak position. The arrival of a mythical sorcerer may do little more than complicate things and confuse the people.'

The King gave a grunt and paused, a thoughtful look on his face. 'You may very well be right, Arlodh; but the people believe in him. That might be useful.'

Arlodh fixed the King with a penetrating stare. Gavo froze, transfixed. Arlodh spoke softly, but his tone accepted no denial. 'Gavo, you will listen to no others but me. You will listen and you will obey, for I am the Master.'

'Listen and obey,' repeated Gavo in a monotone. Arlodh gave the King a look of contempt and turned and left, chuckling menacingly to himself.

It was early the next morning when Merlin, Elim and Daucus arrived at the open

gates of Portus Adurni. Daucus announced their arrival to the guards and they were admitted within the walls. Word of the coming of the legendary magician had clearly spread fast, and before they had got far into the town a large crowd had gathered around the three friends, cheering and calling out Merlin's name. Elim was slightly overawed by the size of the crowds and couldn't help gazing around at the tall buildings. He had never seen so many people in one place before and although a number of the buildings in Aquae Sulis had been grander, they had mostly stood in decaying ruins. Portus Adurnis was a crowded, vibrant town, the likes of which he had not experienced until now.

They made their way along the narrow streets, carried by the excited mob, towards the hall of the King, their progress becoming ever more difficult as the crowd became even bigger. However, despite Elim's concerns that the situation might get out of hand, the mood remained resolutely good-humoured. Then a tall, smiling figure stepped out in front of them and effortlessly calmed the crowd with a shushing gesture. With order re-established, he spoke, introducing himself as Cunorix, General of the Army of the Kingdom of Portus Adurni and Captain of the Guard. 'Merlin, in the name of King Gavo, welcome to Portus Adurni. The King has commanded me to bring you to him. If you and your followers will come with me...' He turned to the crowd and with a smile added, 'And you lot, wait here and keep the noise down.'

The crowd laughed with the General, who was clearly a popular man, but as he led Merlin, Elim and Daucus into the hall, they began chanting the wizard's name, 'Merlin, Merlin, Merlin!' Elim thought his master looked uncomfortable at this display of adoration, but at least, he reflected, they were getting a warm welcome.

The welcome inside the hall was noticeably colder. Cunorix showed the three friends through the council chamber and into a side room, where Gavo was sitting behind a large table. Standing behind him was a forbidding, black-robed and trim-bearded figure, whom Cunorix introduced as Arlodh, the King's advisor. Elim noticed the immediate look of hostile recognition that passed between Merlin and this man. Remaining seated, the King greeted the wizard with no sense of warmth or welcome. 'You are Merlin?'

'King Gavo, I presume? Yes, that is the name by which I am known.'

'Why are you here?' The King's tone was little short of hostile. Arlodh's expression betrayed his satisfaction. He stayed silent and allowed the King to continue, but Elim was left with the impression that it was he who was in charge here.

Merlin replied, 'I have come because you are in danger, Gavo – perhaps more than you know.' He glanced at Arlodh, who smiled maliciously back at him. 'With the Romans gone, your new kingdom may fall,' continued the wizard. 'I have come to offer my assistance in its... in your defence.'

The King was clearly unimpressed. 'I fail to see what help you can be. We need swords – and men to use them. Can you conjure up soldiers, Wizard?'

Merlin merely smiled in answer.

'No, I thought not,' snapped Gavo. 'Well, as you have seen, you have a welcome here from my people. Your presence should help keep them happy, so I will not throw you out – at least not yet. But I've no use for you. You may stay for now; but keep out of my way and don't cause trouble.'

Before Merlin could respond, Gavo had swept from the room. Cunorix flashed Merlin an apologetic smile, then followed the King.

Merlin turned to Arlodh. Without speaking, the two men began circling the table, their attention firmly on each other as if Elim and Daucus were no longer there. It was Merlin who broke the silence. 'So, it's you - the Master; I thought I would find you here. So, you managed to escape from the Planet of the Cheetah People before it was destroyed? I can't say I'm altogether surprised.'

'Fancy seeing you, my dear Doctor,' Arlodh chuckled. 'Or is it Merlin? Well, isn't that priceless!' He gave an evil laugh. 'What are you doing here? I hope you haven't come to this cold wet island, especially on my account.'

'No, not on your account. Don't flatter yourself, Master. I'm here purely by accident. As a result of another encounter with Morgaine, as it happens.'

The Master smiled in recognition of the name.

'I have known for some time that I was destined to become Merlin; to work with the High King Arthur and to stand with him against a great evil. But before I was able to meet Arthur, my TARDIS and I became separated. It is stuck some eighty years in the future, while I was thrown back in time and arrived here. My only way back to my TARDIS and to Arthur is the long way – to live out those eighty years, until the High King arises.'

At this story, the Master roared with laughter. 'Oh, that is wonderful, just wonderful. My dear Doctor, you do have a problem. But you know, delightfully it is a problem with which I can easily help you out. We can just pop in my TARDIS and I can take you back to yours in a trice.'

The Doctor smiled humourlessly, 'Oh Master, do you really think I will agree to that? Even if I didn't think you would throw me into space at the first opportunity, I couldn't leave you here now, could I? This is a critical point in

Earth's history. I can't just let you get on with whatever plans you are preparing. I will have to stay around and keep an eye on you. No thank you. The long way will be fine.'

'Well, the offer is there, Doctor. Do let me know if you reconsider. I am at your service, as ever.' The façade of bonhomie was dropped in an instant, 'But I'm sure you have noticed that we are both a little restrained in what we can do, are we not?' The Master concluded in a menacing tone, 'Just stay out of my way Doctor. If you meddle with me, you will regret it.' He left the room, ending the discussion.

Elim's questions came in a torrent. 'Who was that, Merlin? How do you know him? What did he mean, 'restrained'?'

'He is usually known as the Master. He is an evil... sorcerer, whom I have battled on many occasions. Yes, he is right, we are both restrained in what we can do. He has the ear of Gavo, so I cannot move against him; but you saw the reaction of the people to our arrival; that gives us some protection from him. We will need to be careful though. If he is here, then it is no coincidence. He is up to no good. He is ruthless and capable of the most terrible evil. We need to find out what he is doing and stop him – without getting on the wrong side of the King.'

At that moment, Cunorix came back into the room. 'I'm sorry about Gavo. He's a good man, but he's worried. He's asked me to show you to your quarters.'

Merlin looked concerned. 'He has every reason to be worried. I only hope that I can get past whatever it is that is causing him to mistrust us and give him my help.'

As Cunorix led the three friends across the forum, Merlin noticed a figure sitting outside a tavern. At first Elim took the object of his master's attention for a young man. It was only when he looked more carefully that he realised that he had no idea what he was looking at. 'Daucus, am I going mad?' he whispered.

The two friends couldn't help staring at what looked like a man-sized, green-scaled lizard, whose head was surmounted by three bony ridges. As they watched, the monster downed a flagon of ale, stood up on two legs and prepared to leave.

Cunorix was amused by their astonishment. 'Ah, I see you have noticed Draco, the King's Dragon. He's perfectly harmless – rather a good harpist, in fact. He's

lived here with us most of his life, since we found him on the beach as a young child.'

Merlin turned to Elim and Daucus, 'You two go on with Cunorix. I'll see you later.' And with that he straightened his straw hat and set off purposefully in pursuit of Draco.

Draco had just returned to his house and picked up his harp when he was disturbed by a voice from the door. 'Hello, may I come in?' The stranger wore clothing, the like of which Draco had never seen before: a brown jacket with a band of patterned cloth draped around his neck; a round hat made of straw; shoes made of two varieties of leather; and – more in keeping with fashion – checked trousers. The little man didn't wait for Draco to answer before assuming that he had permission and came into the house. He raised his hat and gave a smile, 'I'm the Doctor – although around here I'm known as Merlin. Do you mind if I ask, what is a young Silurian like you doing here?'

It was the second time Draco had heard that word in as many days. 'Silurian, yes that's what Arlodh called me. Are you a friend of his? Did he send you? I told him, I'm not interested in finding my own people, dominating the humans or taking over the world. If you've come here to talk me around to helping him...'

'Draco, Draco, please let me assure you, that the last thing I am is a friend of Arlodh. I am here to do nothing other than offer my help. Arlodh is a very dangerous man. Now, what did he tell you about his plans? Anything you can remember may be important.'

Draco was silent for a moment while he considered the little man's words. Then he nodded. In truth, Arlodh's visit of the previous day had scared him. Although he had always been wary of the man, yesterday he had gained a real sense that he was truly evil. Since then he had felt alone and vulnerable. Perhaps this 'Doctor', this 'Merlin' could help him. Just as he had instinctively distrusted Arlodh, he knew somehow, he could trust this little man. 'He wants to find and awaken my people. He wants to use them in his plans to rule the world. I told him I wasn't interested, but there was something I didn't tell him.'

At this Merlin's interest was piqued. 'And what was this secret you kept, Draco?'

'I didn't tell him that I remember my people. I have been here since I was very

young, but I remember before then. I remember a city in a great cavern. I remember everyone going to sleep. They told me that I would sleep too and that when I awoke all would be well. But when I did wake up, I was alone. Everyone else was still asleep and I couldn't wake them.'

'You all overslept by a very long time – it's just that you have awoken a little sooner than the rest.'

'But there's more. I've spent some time looking for that city in a cavern, where my people are still sleeping. And Merlin, I've found it. I've found them.'

'Can you show me where that is Draco?'

Draco paused before answering, then decided that he had to take a chance and trust this man. If he didn't, he felt sure that Arlodh would, in the end, force the information from him. 'The entrance is in a hidden cave, near the beach. I can take you there tonight.'

The Master looked up from the book he had been reading and sighed. Machiavelli was such an idealist, he reflected. There were certainly things that he, the Master, could teach him about statecraft. Perhaps, when he had finished here, he might stop by sixteenth century Florence and offer some guidance. In the meantime, it might be fun to leave this copy of *Il Principe* lying around here, when he left. That might stir things up a little. But why was he thinking of leaving when there was still so much to do? Of course, it was the unexpected appearance of the Doctor that was provoking these thoughts. 'I'm not running anywhere, Doctor,' he said aloud. 'This time, you won't stop me.'

He was disturbed by the arrival of the girl. She stood silently, waiting to be invited to speak. 'What is it Essa? What have you to tell me?'

'Master, the Sorcerer Merlin is with the Dragon boy. They have left the town unseen, through a tunnel under the walls that some of the young people use when they want to slip out without their parents knowing.'

The Master jumped to his feet. 'Quick, we must follow them, take me to this tunnel.'

The young Silurian led the Doctor along the beach. Draco was sure that they hadn't been seen leaving the town, but the bright moonlight left him feeling

exposed. 'Over there.' He pointed towards a low line of cliffs. It took only a moment to reach the cave. They brushed aside the undergrowth which obscured the entrance and on hands and knees crawled through. Once inside, they could stand, as the cave opened up.

The Doctor took a small metal tube from within his jacket, and with a click the cavern was illuminated. Draco smiled at the trick, then indicated for the little man to follow him deeper into the cave. Through a fissure, they came into another, larger cavern, which then led into another and then another. Finally, they came to an ancient metal door, blocking their further progress. Draco turned and gave a smile then placed his left palm against the door, and it slid aside to reveal a passageway behind.

'Merlin,' Draco whispered, 'Welcome to the city of my people.' He stepped through the door and instantly the passageway was lit up. As he always did, he looked up to search for the source of this illumination; but could see none. It was as if the rock itself was glowing.

The distance from the door to the main chamber was a short one and soon Draco and the Doctor were standing in what, the first time he saw it, the young Silurian took for a hall of wonders. Although he knew he would never understand the workings of the extraordinary machines, he knew now that they were the product of his people's ancient, lost science. The Doctor didn't hesitate; he went immediately over to the metal banks and began dashing from machine to machine, pulling switches, turning knobs, pressing buttons and muttering inaudibly to himself. Nothing he did seemed to produce any results.

Draco looked on in alarm, 'Doctor, what are you doing. Please take care.'

Without looking up, the Doctor answered, all the while still trying new buttons and switches. 'I need to find out how many of your people are sleeping here; and more importantly to make sure that they don't wake up right now. That would be very awkward indeed. The last thing we need is such an unpredictable element in a situation like we have here now – especially with the Master poking his nose in. Frankly, I find it quite puzzling and indeed worrying that you woke up when you did. It suggests there might be a glitch in the system.'

Draco didn't follow all of the Doctor's words, but he understood his concern.

'Now, if I just press this one and turn that one, then I should see... Ah yes, there we are...?' As the Doctor spoke, the room was filled with a low humming sound and the machines lit up as one. Rows of red lights began strobing up and down a hundred panels or more. 'As I thought...' The Doctor looked up. 'Draco, what we have here is a medium sized Silurian hibernation chamber, with about

two hundred of your people, all fast asleep. We need to make sure that, for now at least, they stay that way.'

The Doctor pulled another switch and stood back to observe the results of his work. A satisfied smile started to spread across his face but was immediately replaced by a look of concern and then panic. More panels had begun to light up and the low humming was becoming louder. 'No, no... that's not right...' Clearly worried, he stabbed at more buttons and tugged on more switches, but it was having no effect. Finally, he stepped away from the machines and looked at Draco in alarm. 'It's no use. I've managed to start precisely the thing that I came here to avoid. Your people, Draco... they're waking up. Two hundred Silurian warriors are waking up. We need to warn Gavo. Run!'

With Essa by his side, the Master watched intently, unseen from behind a rock, as the Doctor and Draco ran from the cave. He turned and spoke to the girl, 'Go quickly now Essa. You know what you have to do.'

From behind dead eyes, the girl answered, 'Yes, Master. I know what I have to do.'

The Doctor and the young Silurian made no attempt to avoid being seen when they reached the town, banging loudly on the gates and demanding readmittance. When the guards saw who was making all the noise, they opened the gates without delay.

They had made little progress towards the hall of the King when they were intercepted by Essa. Draco could see that the girl was worried as she ran up to them, calling out their names.

'Merlin, Draco, come quickly.'

The Doctor gave the Silurian an enquiring look.

'Merlin, this is Essa, the daughter of Gavo,' Draco explained. 'What's the matter, Essa?'

'Draco, it's Maccus,' She gasped, out of breath from her exertions. 'He's had an accident. He was on top of the battlements – looking for you. He must have slipped and fallen. He's badly hurt – very badly. Come quickly. He's asking for you.'

Draco looked from the Doctor to Essa in indecision. ‘Doctor, Maccus is my best friend. I must go to him,’ he pleaded.

The Doctor considered for a moment, ‘Yes, of course you must. Go now. I’ll talk to Gavo. I’m sure I can convince him of the danger. Go to your friend.’ He turned and resumed hurrying towards the hall of the King.

‘Thank you, Doctor,’ Draco called after him and turned to follow Essa.

Gavo’s manner on seeing the Doctor was considerably more welcoming than it had been the last time they had met. The Doctor looked around the small group gathered in the King’s private chamber and understood the explanation for this thaw; the Master – Arlodh – wasn’t present.

‘King Gavo, your friend Draco is a young Silurian; a member of the race of intelligent reptiles who were the original inhabitants of the Earth; a race that has been in hibernation for millennia in hidden chambers beneath the surface. Draco is a kind and gentle friend, but I have met his people before, and I know that they are neither kind nor gentle and they will certainly want to reclaim the planet. Gavo, there is a colony of Silurians right here on your doorstep and they are waking up. They are fearless and powerful, and they have weapons far beyond anything you could imagine. Despite all your warriors’ skill and courage, you will not be able to stand against them.’

Gavo listened without reaction to Merlin’s account of his visit to the Silurian shelter. When the wizard had finished his tale, the King looked to his advisors. ‘Arlodh? Where is Arlodh? He should be here. Well, never mind him, Cunorix!’ He turned to his general. ‘What do you think of this story?’

‘I think, my King that it sounds extraordinary, but that this is Merlin, the wizard whose coming was prophesied. We all know Draco and he is our friend. We have called him ‘Dragon’, but we have always known that he was something else. My King, I believe what Merlin has told us. In any case, we need to be prepared for attacks from wherever they may come, be it from Saxons or Silurians.’

The King nodded thoughtfully. ‘Merlin, where is our Dragon, Draco?’

‘He was called away to be with his friend Maccus who has had some sort of accident.’

At this the King looked puzzled. Cunorix spoke, ‘You are mistaken Merlin. Maccus is my son – there he stands.’ He indicated the young man standing to the

side of the King's table, who replied with a little smile and a wave.

Merlin didn't smile back. 'In which case, King Gavo, I need to tell you that the man you call Arlodh is in truth a dangerous and evil sorcerer, who is usually known as the Master. I'm afraid that he has Draco and probably plans to return him to the Silurians.' Shouts of shock and anger went around the room. 'With your permission Gavo, I would like to go back to the Silurian shelter, to try to rescue Draco and prevent an attack.'

'And we'll come with you.' The Doctor hadn't noticed that both Elim and Daucus had been listening to his story and both of them, together with Maccus, now jumped to his side.

'No, that won't work. Maccus, your place is here, helping your father to organise the defence of Portus Adurni. And you, my friends Elim and Daucus, need to stay here and help too. This is something that I shall be able to do better on my own.'

'But Merlin.'

'No Elim. Please, do as I ask. Stay here.'

The young sorcerer's apprentice nodded his assent.

'Let me out of here, you fools,' fumed the Master. 'I represent your best chance of defeating the humans. Together we can find more of your people's hibernation shelters.' He watched the Silurians angrily through the bars of the cage where he had been placed.

'We do not need your help', spat the leader of the reptiles. 'The eradication of the primitive apes is not something that will be difficult for us.' Without another word he turned to continue the preparations for the attack.

'But I returned the boy to you. Is that not a sign of my good will?' It was no use, none of the Silurians were listening. As the Master watched them gather their forces and march out of the cave, leaving him alone in the silence, he reflected that he may have underestimated just how stupid they were. Forlornly he tested the lock on the cage, then sat down to wait. Almost at once he heard a sound. Before he could make out the small figure with the ridiculous hat, he knew who it was.

'Have you come to gloat, Doctor?' The words dripped with contempt. 'Shouldn't you be helping that so-called King and his little town? Those Silurians whom you so kindly woke up will overrun them, you know.' Despite

his own predicament, the Master couldn't help but chuckle maliciously.

The Doctor stepped out from the shadows, 'And then what, Master? Do you think that having tasted blood, they will come back here and set you free? Will they accept your offer of help? Perhaps they will acclaim you as their leader? You know as well as I do, that they have only kept you alive as a hostage in case things don't go entirely to plan. Once they have overrun Portus Adurni, they will have no more use for you.'

The Master considered his options. He knew the Doctor was almost certainly right; but there was still a chance that he might be able to exert his influence over these reptiles. But no, it had become clear that they were almost entirely immune to his mind control techniques. 'Very well, Doctor. What do you suggest?'

The Doctor smiled mirthlessly. 'It's come to the point where we are going to have to work together, Master. Do you agree?'

He considered for a moment then nodded, 'Very well, a truce it is. Now get me out of here.'

The Doctor examined the nearest control panel, then pressed a button. 'Stand back,' he ordered, but nothing happened. He peered again at the controls, then pressed another button. The bars of the Master's cage began to retract into the roof of the cavern, and he stepped out. 'Right,' the Doctor commanded, 'one of these panels must control the hibernation chambers. If we can find it and activate the signal, we should be able to send all the Silurians back to sleep.'

The Master nodded and the two arch foes began examining the banks of instruments that filled the cavern. To his satisfaction, it was the Master, who found what they were looking for. 'Doctor, I think this is it.'

The Doctor came over and saw what the Master had found. 'Yes, you're right.' He reached over and to the Master's chagrin, pulled the switch.

At once the air was alive with a throbbing pulse. The two Time Lords looked at each other in expectation. At first there was no indication whether the signal was working or not; then in the distance, but all the while coming closer, they could hear the sound of marching feet. At once the massed body of the Silurians swarmed into the cave. The Master sank back into the shadows. The danger to him had passed; time to leave this time and place, he decided. The Doctor held firm, 'They're all in a trance,' he called; then he realised he was now alone, 'Master? Oh, where is he?'

Wordlessly, the Silurians separated into smaller groups and began sleepwalking into side chambers off the main cavern. With a start, the Doctor recognised one of the reptiles, 'Draco!'

At the sound of his name, the young Silurian stopped in his tracks and shook his head slightly, then turned, 'Merlin... Doctor?'

'Hello Draco. Are you re-joining your people? You know, you could always go back to Portus Adurni, you have a home there – friends.'

'I think I have to stay here, Merlin. I was always a stranger among the humans – a curiosity – the King's dragon. I've found my people now. I can stay here, sleep with them and then in time wake up with them. Then I hope I can help teach them to live alongside the humans, as I have. Thank you for all you have done Doctor.'

The Doctor smiled, 'I wish you well, Draco. Sleep well, perhaps we shall see each other again one day.'

Draco turned and left. The Doctor followed him and his group into a hibernation chamber, where each of the Silurians stepped into a booth. As they entered, individual glass domes encased them and their long sleep was resumed. Engrossed by the scene, the Doctor was unaware of another presence in the room, until he felt a sharp push in his back and stumbling forward, he fell into an empty hibernation booth. By the time he had recovered and turned, the dome had descended, trapping him.

From beyond the glass, the Master was laughing at his plight. 'It's time you caught up on your sleep Doctor. I've no doubt that I won't be welcome at Gavo's court any longer, so while you're snoozing, I think I will move on. Goodbye Doctor!' He turned and left the chamber, still laughing.

Looking frantically around the booth, the Doctor spotted a panel and began stabbing randomly at the controls. There seemed to be no way of either opening the booth or stopping the hibernation process. He was already feeling sleepy. 'There, that should do it.' He hoped he had managed to set the sleep timer to eighty years. 'At least that saves me having to find something to do to pass the time,' he thought, as the darkness enveloped him.

'What will you do?' Elim asked Daucus. It had been a full week since Merlin, Arlodh and Draco had all disappeared and the two friends were sitting on the

harbour wall, looking out to sea. 'It looks as if he isn't coming back.'

'No, I think you're right. He is sleeping beneath the hills.'

The two men considered this. The only person who might have known what had happened to the now disgraced King's adviser, the Dragon and the sorcerer was Essa, Gavo's daughter. She had been discovered sitting alone by the shore, unable to remember anything about what had happened. All she could say were the words, 'Beneath the Earth.' The mention of the name Arlodh reduced her to terror. Extensive searches had been carried out but had revealed nothing.

'So, what will you do?' insisted Elim.

'I shall stay here,' replied Daucus. Gavo will need all the help he can get and anyway, I can't leave, in case Merlin comes back. What about you?'

'Here is as good as anywhere.' He smiled as the girl Essa came and sat beside him. 'He will return, you know. It is prophesied.'

A Most Peculiar Infection

Graham Tedesco-Blair

‘The essence of Marx’s critique of ‘the so-called primitive accumulation’ (and people too often miss the significance of the phrase ‘so-called’) is that no amount of accumulation, whether from outright theft, from imperialism, from commercial profit, or even from the exploitation of labour for commercial profit, by itself constitutes capital, nor will it produce capitalism. The specific precondition of capitalism is a transformation of social property relations that generates capitalist ‘laws of motion’: the imperatives of competition and profit-maximization, a compulsion to reinvest surpluses, and a systematic and relentless need to improve labour-productivity and develop the forces of production.’

Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism*

‘But an idea is hard to kill. An idea could escape.’

The Doctor, *The Satan Pit*

There were few things the Master liked; a good beard trim and haircut, a comfortable chair, a nice cigar, dolls, the look on someone’s face as they succumbed to a complicated death trap and realised the absurdity and inevitability of their situation... and, of course, children’s television. So much more pure and innocent and insightful than the drivel that ‘adults’ occupied themselves with.

He had found himself a well-equipped apartment, let himself in, and settled down to relax. Two small dolls sat next to him on the couch, keeping him company. It seemed wrong that they shouldn’t get to enjoy the program as well.

On the oversized, flat-screen television, a cartoon horse in a cowboy hat works herself close to death for the benefit of her community. Shades of Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, the Master thought with amusement. She collects an entire orchard worth of apples for her injured brother, saves the town from a stampede, and exhausts herself too much to attend the ceremony held in her honour by the town, embarrassing herself and her friends in the process. But still, the little horse isn’t done! She helps a rainbow haired Pegasus throw herself from a see-saw, then ruins an entire batch of muffins, causing the town to fall ill. Finally,

through her impatience and negligence, she causes a stampede of rabbits to tear the town asunder. Exhausted and downtrodden, she asks her friends for help, only for the purple unicorn to harvest the entire orchard with her magical powers, thus rendering the cowboy horse's efforts throughout the episode entirely needless!

A perfect moral for children, the Master thought. The strong prevail effortlessly, while the weak struggle and scrape to get by.

There was a strange noise, a distinctive, rhythmic, 'key scraped across a piano string' whoosh that signalled the arrival of a TARDIS. The Master stroked his goatee, freshly trimmed that morning, and tapped the edge of his cigar into the ashtray on the end table. All as expected, of course.

The man who emerged – young, spikey-haired, and wearing the cheapest sort of pinstripe suit one could find, along with sneakers – made the Master want to laugh. His old nemesis, his counterpart, his other half, reduced to this?

But no, the time for laughter was later. He was going to relish this.

'This is a nice place you've got here,' said the Doctor, examining a framed print of a comic strip on the wall: A man reading a newspaper is looking for his pipe; it is revealed that his cat had stolen it and is smoking it. 'Wonderful decor. A little mancavish for my tastes, but hey, who am I to judge? Shelves of kids' toys, figurines of girls not wearing much, boxes of games... I'm all for a good game, mind you. Never seem to find time to play them, though.'

The Master patted the couch, next to the dolls. 'Well, you'd best sit down, my dear Doctor. Don't mind them, their need for comfort has been, shall we say... severely reduced.' He grinned, wondering if this Doctor would pick up on the intended meaning.

'Oh, now that's just awful. Why'd you go and do a thing like that? I was hoping we could get along this time – maybe break open a bottle of Saurian brandy and play a few hands of something. Watch a movie. Not do this whole... *thing*... that we do.'

'No, this... *thing*... as you call it, has been, as I'm sure you would say, very much done.'

'I don't know what you've done, but I will stop you,' said the Doctor.

'What *I*'ve done? Oh come now, Doctor. Do be a good guest and let yourself relax. There's no hurry, after all.'

'No hurry?'

'In fact, I'm happy to tell you all about it.'

'Really now?' The Doctor made a face. 'Oh, well, if that's the way you want

to go about it. Always did love a good story. Not that it's going to stop me stopping you.'

'I think you're going to enjoy this one...'

The entity knew Number needed to go up.

This was the entirety of its existence, Number, and its height. Nothing else mattered. It needed to be the most efficient, the most agile, the most ruthless, and, most importantly, the largest.

The man with the hypnotic eyes and intense forehead understood the entity. They were of an accord. The man knew that the entity's needed to be the biggest, and he promised not to interfere. This meant that the man was a sap, a boob, a loser, in the Entity's eyes. How could it not compete? How could it think it was outside the system? How could it think that something was more important than Number? But this also meant that the man was useful, a tool the entity could use for its own ends. Altruistic sorts like the man always could be.

The man helpfully, and without charge, moved the entity from one place to another in his ship, a sort of boundless, floating box that spun through space and time effortlessly. It was exactly the sort of thing the entity despised. It was too well made. It would never break down, despite its myriad parts. It would never become obsolete, despite its age. It would never need to be replaced, because it could change itself into whatever form the style and time required. A repairless, eternal box, with no need to ever do anything to it. A horrible box. The sort that ought never to be made.

They landed in a place called Toulouse in a number called 1150. These things meant nothing to the Entity, but it made indications that it appreciated the information the man provided. Any place and any time would do, provided there were things that could be added to Number.

The man took the entity into town, and met with the Bishop and the town Elders and all the prominent citizens of the place. The entity absorbed all the information that was provided by them, identified a need, and proposed a solution.

A dam. A mill.

The ones that existed were inefficient, outdated, out of fashion. The new was needed, the entity proposed. The better.

Money was a problem at first, because no single citizen possessed the funds to

build the mills. But the entity had a solution in search of such a problem.

And very soon, the entity was comfortably lodged within ninety-six pieces of paper, and within the belief that the people placed within those pieces of paper. These ninety-six *uchaux* proved that the entity existed, even more so than the belief of the people. They represented something different from every other paltry entity that dared to call itself 'company' in the surrounding area. This was no paltry family operation, passed down from father to son, nor a simplistic guild operation, setting prices and standards for the mutual protection of the guild... no, the individual possessors of the *uchaux* did not matter. They could be transferred freely, sold or exchanged as the possessors' fortunes ebbed and flowed. But the entity endured, even independent of the mills and dams and causeways and storehouses and bags of grain.

The Garonne flowed blue against its hard cast dams, the wheels creaked and turned, and thus did the energy flow.

The *uchaux* were worth more and more with each passing year.

Number went up.

There had been accumulation before, of course. Primitive accumulation. The entity would revolutionise all of that. No more the simple hoarding and accumulation that had been done in the past. No. There would be an engine, a mill, a factor by which Number would be multiplied.

They stood on the shore, facing the land. The lush, green fields extended to soft, rolling hills. Soon, Édouard thought, there would be a large house here. The fields would be full of sheep and cows. His wife and his children would be happy here. Never mind the corpses that dotted the landscape; the Saxon dogs could clean them up in time. His companion, the strange man who had turned up after the fighting with a flagon of good wine and a hearty congratulation for the victory, was still talking. His ideas were new, alien... took time to sink in.

'No, no, my dear friend. You will own the land, and you will make them work it. If they do not work it well enough, you kick them off and set up another tenant in their place.' The man had hypnotic eyes and a small beard in a style that Édouard could not place. But, the more he listened, the more Édouard realised that the man spoke sense.

'Like slaves?'

'No, no, better than slaves. Better than slaves because they can be replaced

easily. They'll work because if they don't pay for the privilege of working your land, you give them the boot and then any number of other struggling fools will come begging to do the job. Every so often you increase the quota of what they need to give you, the rent, just to see if they can do it. They deserve it.'

'So, I do not work?'

'No, you are the owner of the land. Of course you don't work. They do. After all, they are not Norman, like you and I.'

'And what do you call this?'

'A lease. Because you do the least work, while they do the most.' The man laughed, and Édouard laughed with him.

The creature was called Captain Ludd by its friends, and The Enemy by the entity.

A vestigial enemy, to be sure, soon to be snuffed out, but persistent and pernicky. A bad idea. A very bad idea, and thus believed only by bad people, by the enemies of the entity. After six hundred years of going up, the entity was not going to be stopped by some silliness that didn't even understand the basic inevitability of the situation.

A broken frame here, a smashed engine there, a torched factory... were there no depths that Ludd would not sink to, the entity pondered. Did it not understand that Number was everything? That it had enclosed pastures, created trends, closed guilds, expanded cities, brought the people of the planet everything they could ever want, provided they paid their obedience to Number?

What was the alternative? Number going *down*?

Inconceivable.

But they burned the mills with their torches, they smashed the looms with their hammers, they ambushed the factory managers and bosses with their fists and clubs.

And the bastards would sing, and these were their words:

Let the wise and the great lend their aid and advice
Nor e'er their assistance withdraw
Till full-fashioned work at the old-fashioned price
Is established by custom and law.

Then the trade when this arduous contest is o'er
Shall raise in full splendor its head
And colting and cutting and swearing no more
Shall deprive all his workers of bread.

As the Liberty lads o'er the sea
Bought their freedom, and cheaply, with blood,
So we, boys, we
Will die fighting, or live free,
And down with all kings but King Ludd!

The entity moved upon the face of the earth, and fines were posted, offering bounty for those who would break frames, for those who led protests, for those who would disrupt the order. What had worked before would work again. The entity knew that humankind, still in its infancy, would respond to Number. Having so little, their desires could be stoked. One person, given the world, could destroy thousands. And this, in turn, served Number as well. And if the offer of prosperity did not work, then the closure of alternatives would continue to. Already it had tempted those in command of the planet with fancy golden baubles, precious gems, beaver fur hats, and more. Already they had sold themselves and their responsibilities to Number.

Hundreds hung.

The poet's own daughter designed the machines that helped Number go up. From the chained cards of a loom would she calculate numbers more vast and complex than humankind had ever dreamed of.

Thus did the dream of Ludd die, in the rods and cards of an Engine of Numbers.

The man had a peculiar blue and white rosette pinned to his jacket and intense, hypnotic eyes. Some at the gathering would wonder what a Whig was doing at their meetings, but as they were open to all working men, and as the man with the rosette seemed content to sit in the back and listen, the assembled did their best to deliberately ignore him.

These were angry men, men who felt betrayed by their government, by their country, by those who were supposed to be on their side. As ever, those who

worshipped Number had seen to it that these men should be put to work for a useful purpose while simultaneously denying them any voice, and it was for this reason that they gathered.

The Reform Act of 1832 had been one betrayal, and the ending of outdoor relief by the New Poor Law another. No votes for men who didn't own land, and nothing but jails and workhouses for those who had previously been supported. The idea, it seemed, was to make not working as difficult and painful as possible. 'No more laziness and idleness,' cried the disembodied head of Jeremy Bentham from the boardroom of the University College, London. 'Full employment now!'

'The whole body of the burdensome poor to be maintained and employed, in a system of *Industry houses*, upon a *large* scale, distributed over the face of the country as *equally* as may be, with each a portion of *land* at least sufficient for the maintenance of its own population,' the head continued. 'Powers for *apprehending* all persons, able-bodied or otherwise, having neither visible or assignable property, nor honest and sufficient means of livelihood, and detaining and employing them till some responsible person will engage for a certain time to find them in employment, and, upon their quitting it, either to resurrender them or give timely notice; and so *toties quoties*.'

Suffice to say that these gathered men wanted neither workhouse enslavement as a punishment for unemployment, nor their democratic rights denied by the Whiggish wags who thought they knew better.

Six points were proposed, in a charter than any man would agree with. Simple points that would allow a man to work, to vote, to enter parliament without being wealthy, to be represented according to his constituency, and annual elections to prevent corruption (as no man could afford to bribe every man year round). One million, three hundred thousand men signed the charter.

It was ignored.

How could these fools not see, thought the worshippers of Number, this is for their own good? Their educated masters are simply trying to place them into situations where they might better themselves.

The men, this ragged band of coal miners, factory labourers, factotums, and communists, agreed that something must be done.

And the men, said one John Frost, would march.

And the men would sing, and these were their words:

Uphold those bold Comrades, who suffer for you,

Who nobly stand foremost, demanding your due,
Away with the timid – 'tis treason to fear—
To surrender or falter, when danger is near,
For now that our leaders disdain to betray
'Tis base to desert them, or succour delay
'Tis time that the victims of labour and care
Should for reap what is labour's fair share
'Tis time that these voice in the councils be heard
Then rather than pay for the law of the sword;
All power is ours, with a will of our own
We conquer, united – divided we groan.
Come hail brothers, hail the shrill sound of the horn
For ages deep wrongs have been hopelessly borne
Despair shall no longer our spirits dismay
Nor wither the arms when upraised for the fray;
The conflict for freedom is gathering nigh:
We live to secure it, or gloriously die.

They were gunned down shortly after, in front of the Westgate Hotel. Twenty two dead, and more than fifty wounded.

The number was called 1929, and it was a problem.

Come the so-called Black Friday, when plenty of Number worshipping young men had gone tumbling out of windows or hung themselves with their fashionable ties, there was a much greater problem: Number had gone down.

There had been brief spurts before, but never like this, not on this scale. Everything had been going so well. The Empires, not ones of soldiers and walls, but Empires of Exchange, were reaching deeper and deeper into the world. Nothing was undiscovered, everything was mapped. New machinery had driven the world into a state wholly unrecognisable from the old. People flew through the skies, communicated instantly across the world, and discovered limits of space and time and light that had previously thought only to be the provenance of the gods.

Someone important said, 'You know it's time to sell when shoeshine boys give you stock tips. This bull market is over.' The boy had told him 'Buy

Hindenburg.'

And much like the famed airship, it had all come to a fiery end, with onlookers crying and pondering the ineffability of the universe.

How could it have happened? Everything was working perfectly: Gold was humming along as the standard of trade, the world had more food than it knew what to do with after some tiny conflict in some country had increased the demand, margin calls were allowing for the borrowing of money at rates never before seen... it should have kept going up, up, up forever.

It considered the possibilities and it dreamed. Austerity for you but not for me; turning on the great money printers and giving everyone a job, because no man who owns his own home becomes a communist; legions of troops pouring across the battlefields, becoming trapped in barbed wire and roasted with flames; a great, grand, metal cylinder that would be filled with gasoline and fired as high as the atmosphere reached, only to plummet back down and destroy whatever was in its path – and then, a cylinder thrown so high that it landed upon the moon, and from there, Mars, and Jupiter (after plundering the riches of the failed planets in between), and then...

Yes, this was but a temporary setback. A brief convalescence while Number recovered, and then surged back stronger than ever.

It couldn't be that the system itself was flawed. No, considered the entity. The tiny, brief men who moved about during their brief existence had temporarily fouled things, but they would pass as quickly as their transactions, and be no more.

Only Number was eternal.

Everything was shiny and new.

The world seemed cast in bronze and silver, with massive skyscrapers going up every day, a thousand new gadgets and gewgaws produced to make life the most convenient it had ever been, and bigger numbers than had ever been seen before.

The entity looked upon its works, and smiled.

Had it not put down the strikers? Had it not clawed its way back from the brink of extinction, when everyone assumed, foolishly, that Number might go down? Had it not plunged the world into devastation and led it into prosperity? And had it not done so in such a way as to bring about the endgame?

A foolish man, one Dr Marx, had warned some of the people about the engine and Number, but he was dead and buried, a ghost that simply haunted the world and made its poorest residents uncomfortable. The rent payers and tenants might cry for justice, but their appeals fell on either deaf ears, or those who would judge them harshly for wanting better than what they had. This was the trick that the entity was most proud of: simply setting the poor against one another. There was no need to get itself dirty and soiled with the grime of low Numbers. Let them scabble in the dust for the crumbs that fell off its plate. It would pay itself, and its fortune would grow forever, until it possessed all.

The entity dreamed: the entire planet, given over to production, to satisfying needs, to efficiency. The people would beg to work, their starving mouths open with pleas to be of service. The factories would hum, quiet and content, with no moving parts, no waste, no unnecessary motion, no energy expended that was not captured and utilised. The value would increase asymptotically until it approached infinity. Eventually, every bit of matter would be integrated into itself, processing 1.36×10^{50} bits per second per kilogram of its mass, all 5.972×10^{24} kilograms of the planet dedicated to its use. And then, as time continued, and it expanded, it would devour the others like itself, combining and integrating their numbers into itself until all 1.5×10^{53} kilograms of the universe would be dedicated to its use, forever processing higher and higher numbers.

Then, and only then, the entity thought, would it have won. There could be no number higher. No competition, no jealousy, no envy; just number, forever and ever.

The entity hung satellites in the sky and fired probes deep into space, secure in the knowledge that it was winning, and that soon, all would be part of itself.

‘Well, Doctor, do you see?’ the Master asked. ‘Do you understand what I’ve made your entire little world, with but a simple idea?’

‘No, no,’ said the Doctor. ‘People are good. You have to see that. What about their compassion, their charity, their kindness?’

‘All foolishness. That is nothing compared to the great Number, Doctor.’ An ironic grin and short laugh followed.

‘This ends. Now.’

‘And how do you propose to do that? Shut down the factories that feed and clothes the masses? Stop the trading that incentivises the job creators?’ He

winked. 'Will you undo the history of your precious planet, Doctor?'

The Master laughed, then laughed again. Soon, torrents of laughter filled the room. 'What will you do, Doctor? What will you do?'

The Empress of Kolkata

Rachel Redhead

It's written that to everything there is given an age. The age of cave paintings, the age of stories, the age of kings, the age of beliefs and now the age of information. Each age carries over but a scrap of that before it. Most of history has been lost, not because of any great plan or action, but simply because people forget. So we tend to define the past only by the things which have been retained. History is at best a greatest hits album of all our remembered yesteryears, a saccharine feel-good collection that hides the true depth and complexity of all that was.

Stories are not static. They live and grow. They change with each repeated telling. Each audience has its own foibles to be catered for, so the story adapts to these if it wants to be remembered. The most successful stories grow into myths and legends. Some of them may even bear a passing resemblance to the true events that first started them on their long journey through emerging cultures.

Know then, it was in the year 1905 that the Empress of Kolkata, her divine and resplendent majesty, lived inside her munificent Ivory Palace within the great city. Cities are more akin to ships than anything else, they ride out the passage of time, growing and shrinking, rising and falling. This city survived countless generations to reach this auspicious day.

A little to one side, a small blue box had arrived. To the casual passers-by it went unnoticed, as if that anachronistic blue box had always been there. It looked like it could have been made of wood and glass, but this was no construct of any human mind or engineer. It was a TARDIS, a remarkable and mysterious creation, though an inferior older model. The newer models have chameleon circuits that don't break so easily, and they have the distinct advantage of containing inbuilt weaponry.

Some say that the first time ships were grown from the enigmatic time crystals mined from the heart of Mount Longing, on the eastern shores of the great Lake of Sorrow. Others say they were built from the designs of Rassilon himself, the first and dullest leader of the most insipid and boring race of beings known only as the Time Lords of Gallifrey. Ancient and wise, eternal and ever-watchful, these tedious beings gaze from their lofty moral high ground upon all the countless worlds of the universe, sworn to watch, but never interfere. Luckily a few of them evolved different ideals.

The broken blue time ship's pilot, for lack of a better word, is known as the Doctor. He is a young man to look at, but his eyes are filled with the deep and timeless secrets of the universe, much of which he never speaks about. His mouth hides the wondering doubt of a true scholar, behind the bland smile that could be a greeting or just vague embarrassment. He is a Time Lord, but unlike those old dusty academic fools of his home world of Gallifrey, he is an energetic and vital man of intellect and adventure with a do-gooder temperament. Furthermore, he's every bit as sanctimonious as he sounds, though this one's not as supercilious as some others.

Skulking along with the Doctor is the minor political refugee Turlough. Older son of the disfavoured leader of his planet, he was sent into hiding on Earth over eighty years from this current day, on a small damp island that had somehow grained a brief foothold upon the planet. He's not important enough for the new regime to kill, but he's still worrisome enough that they deemed it necessary to watch over him, at least until others got hold of him. He almost became interesting, but the Doctor got to him first and infected him with his sickening morality.

'It's hot,' said Turlough. Oh, what a bore the boy could be, I swear he's not changed since he last met me. Turlough had been raised in the English boarding school system, so he tended to default to talking about the current weather as a way of social conversation.

'Yes,' the Doctor agreed. He'd checked the instruments after landing, which he didn't always do as it added to the wonderment of their travels, or something like that. This was how he knew to leave his jacket and woollen jumper in his TARDIS. They were more of an affectation for him – he could tolerate a much wider range of weather extremes than a human being. 'We're in the Western Bengal province of India, before the monsoon.'

'At least we'll get a decent reception from the British officials.' Turlough had suffered double history lessons every Thursday afternoon. His jingoistic teacher could barely contain his xenophobia when it came to talking up horrific conquests as glorious victories and how the British Empire had been the greatest achievement by any nation. Turlough hated Thursday afternoons.

'They're all in Shimla at this time of the year,' the Doctor replied casually. 'Up in the foothills of the Himalayas the heat there is more bearable for them.' He casually put his panama hat on his head. 'This way I think,' he said, heading towards the heart of the city. 'You know Turlough, I think this is Calcutta, they changed the name in 2001.' He looked around to see that there was no trace of

his travelling companion to be seen. 'Typical,' he then said to himself.

The city developed, as all social constructions do, from small trading villages. The East India Company latched on like a parasite and created Fort William to protect their trading licence at the end of the seventeenth century. Like good little imperialists, they destroyed all that they couldn't subjugate, and their ignorance was extensive. The Doctor ambled along the modern echoes of those early streets. Houses are easier to rebuild than streets, so those patterns tend to remain long after they were first devised. He kept in the shade whenever possible. They might not be as sensitive as their human equivalents, but even Gallifreyan eyes can be affected by glare. The Doctor's were of course adapted to detect the light of a very a different star. Over time, his exposure to many other worlds had seen that adaption extend, but there are still limits. I'm not boring you, am I? Here I am working away, trying to set the scene, to give you some context. I'll get no thanks for this, none at all.

Many people get the monsoon wrong. It's not one single event, it's a complicated mixture of smaller events that take place over several months. This season of welcome respite from the heat is still a few months away. The water-laden hot air pushes up from the south into the Himalayas where it is cooled and rain precipitates out into a great downpour from July to September.

Then later, as this warm air recedes, it pulls down cooler air from the mountains. This cold dry air picks up heat and water on its way down until eventually it sheds its load from September through to December. After that, the land heats up again, in a long dry season of dust and scorching heat. The Doctor knows all this of course and would have explained it to his friend in vivid detail. Except that he's now alone, and that's never a good thing for him. He gets ever so tetchy with just himself for company.

The rain also brings floods, death and disease but those wonderful things are hardly worth mentioning right now. The suffocating heat is of course weeding out the weak. Those tiny people outside my palace weep their little tears and do go on ever so much. Why can't they just go somewhere else and die quietly, like they're supposed to?

'That's not right,' the Doctor said to himself. He prefers an audience for his cleverness but will make do with his own company, even when he's the last person to ever get along with his own company. 'The Ivory Palace?' He looked

further at the notice. 'The Empress of Kolkata?' He knew that it would be another century before Calcutta became known as Kolkata. 'Something's very wrong here.' Like a fly into the parlour, the Doctor walked into the grounds of the mysterious building, right through its gilded cage doors.

'Hello,' I said at last, as my guest made his way like a little deer up towards my modest throne room. I had the bare minimum amount of staff, the few that knew how to stay out of mummy's way while keeping my palace all spick and span. 'Am I not a queen among the little people?'

'The Rani,' the Doctor said, infuriating me in his efforts to sound dismissive. 'I should have recognised your arrogance, beneath the veil and the sari. What are you doing here? Experimenting on the locals no doubt.'

'How dare you,' I replied. I had expected him to recognise me, but he looked at me like I was a stranger. Maybe I should have killed a few people and left their shrunk bodies for him to find, after all, that used to be my usual calling card. 'There's no need to be rude now, is there, dearie? That second-rate dabbler is nothing compared to me, nothing.' I pulled back the thin veil to glare at my best friend. I don't mind telling you that I was angry that he still didn't seem to know me at all. 'How about now?' I gave him my best smile, but it turned into a frown when he just looked at me like he was a fried kipper on a plate. Then sudden recognition flared in his eyes, and at last we were there.

'No,' he said, now looking more like a guppy than a kipper. 'How?'

'Oh, don't be so dreary,' I replied as I placed a simple sleep patch on his hand, with a patting distraction to make him think it was merely an affectation. 'Now come along there's much to be done. If you don't behave then I'll be forced to kill you, and that would only make me cross, most cross indeed.'

'The Master...' the Doctor began to speak, he loves to object to things, it makes him feel important. He's run away from all levels of responsibility that one, so it's best to shut him down early.

'Missy,' I replied. 'Short for Mistress, now come along, don't make me kill you before I'm ready. I really don't want to affect your future selves any more than I already have. It would be... untidy, though such a lot of fun. Lost your little friend, have you? You used to have several of them, spares are always handy. I'd have loved to have played such wonderful games with Tegan or Peri, before I burned them alive. You see I'm the one hard done by here. It's me who has to suffer, because you forgot to bring the snacks to the buffet.' I sighed as he fell unconscious at my feet. 'You're always more agreeable, when you're insensible.'

The Doctor awoke, finally, after lying there and being boring for far too long. How can someone so boring and pious sleep anyway? Their pathological need to meddle in the lives of others must get in the way of reality at some point. Anyway, awake he was, and he looked at me with doubt and pity. ‘What are you planning?’

I smiled, as it was rare that he ever took an interest in what I was up to. Mostly he just wanted to stop me, without even knowing what good deeds I was doing for the universe and myself. ‘Why I’m going to make this dreary planet far more interesting. Imagine it with no more wars, no more deaths and suffering. Humanity will serve me, and with my leadership they’ll become a force for good in the universe.’

The Doctor frowned as I spoke, I knew he would. I’ve always said that I can read him like a book. He’s too limited in his vision, I’ve told him so many times. ‘No World War One, no lost generation. Instead, there will be a united force under my command to unify the planet.’

‘Humans need to find their own path,’ the Doctor made his usual weak arguments. ‘They have to evolve along their own path.’ This one was less arrogant than most, but he’d meddled in their history far more than I had.

I was just more honest about my intentions. Some people live and some die, that’s the honest truth. This global war for the domination of all, to establish universal peace of course, can’t be done without a lot of bloodshed and sacrifice, and it seems I’m the only one capable enough of making the hard decisions. It’s just a pity they’re oh so very squishable – like mayflies really. ‘You can’t really be that naïve,’ I would have laughed at the sheer insanity of his inability to grasp reality, but he was becoming tedious now.

‘It’s all very simple,’ I tried to explain, but how do you begin to explain things to someone who barely scraped a passing mark on their resits? ‘I got the idea from your future self in fact. You wouldn’t like him, all skinny limbs and that terrible squeaky voice. You showed me how to control humanity with their subconscious desires. Twist them to my will, and make them want to serve me – all the while thinking it was their idea. I won’t make the same mistakes as last time either. You see, you can teach a mean girl new tricks.’

‘You’d be surprised how tricky human minds can be,’ the Doctor replied. ‘You’ve constantly underestimated them and what they’re capable of.’

‘Oh, you do go on.’ I rolled my eyes, hoping he would launch himself into yet another boring speech. He was beginning to sound like that tiresome old fool Borusa. How either of us made it through one of his wretched lectures I have no idea. At least I knew how to have fun. There’s wasn’t a single crime he lectured us about that I didn’t go out and break as soon as I could. It was fun and exciting, and there was no-one to stop me. Maybe that’s why I got tired of it, what’s the fun of destroying world after world if there’s no audience to watch me?

Of course, he then tried to interfere. The Doctor I knew at school would have just watched on and made notes about my lovely genocide experiments. What a bore he’s become, and with a sickening streak of morality. How can he even begin to understand what I’m trying to do if he’s always trying to meddle? If he’s not meddling then he’s lecturing everyone to death. Honestly, I have no idea why his little pets didn’t slit their wrists after one of his endless monologues about trying to help others. Sometimes I think he only talks so much to stop others from upstaging him. ‘My dear Doctor, once you understand just how much you’ve misjudged humanity then you’ll come to their senses. I’m just giving you a little push to get there, because I’m kind like that. Once you understand, then you’ll thank me for all of this.’ I danced off towards my chamber, to prepare for the ritual.

I slapped the Doctor back into consciousness. ‘You don’t want to sleep through all of this now, do you?’

‘I wouldn’t miss it,’ the Doctor replied. ‘You and some disposable henchmen in robes and hoods. It’s hardly original, is it?’

‘Humans need a sense of occasion,’ I explained, ‘and I always like to dress up for the big events.’

‘It’s not going to work,’ the Doctor taunted me, he was very good at that – even with this face. It was one of his less-appealing traits, but it was all he had left, and I wanted him to know how much it wasn’t working.

‘Maybe after we’ve finished, I’ll let you find your little pet. He had such potential, but like all who meet you, you sucked him dry and turned him into a pale imitation of yourself. Do they know how much of a vampire you are? Always moving on to fresh new companions, young and energetic. Full of ideas and potential, turned into terrified husks if they’re lucky, or grave-fodder if

they're not. How much of their blood is on your hands? How many more of them will you consume, before you realise that you're just like me?'

'I'm nothing like you,' the Doctor quickly retorted. For a second, I was almost sure he believed his own words, but I knew him better than that.

The chanting began, as did the swaying. There could have been a Bollywood dance routine here, but that would probably be too anachronistic, even for me. 'We summon you great Kali,' I said after a moment, to get my single-servers into the right frame of mind.

'I've seen some poor cases of cultural appropriation in my time,' the Doctor started up again. Does he ever stop? Maybe if I kill him now? No, that would spoil all the delicious fun of knowing just how much this one suffers before he finally does pop his little moral clogs. 'You're using the beliefs of these people for your own selfish ends. You don't even understand what it is you're trying to subsume. You assume that what you know is above that of others. Furthermore, you have no idea what you're dealing with, you never have!'

'Oh, but I do,' I replied tartly. 'There are beings out there who would turn your hair curly again. They'd turn you around like a colour cube, and you'd let them, because of your oh-so-precious sense of morality. I've burned them all, torn down their heavens and filled up their hells with the dead. You seek wisdom and understanding, but they are nothing without the will to apply them, to use them to control and grasp real power.' The Doctor laughed at this, he actually laughed. 'What's so funny?'

'You never learn, do you? Chains bind at both ends, Master, you'd be as much a prisoner of your ambition as those you seek to enslave. Instead of owning what you seek, it would own you, and keep you. The only way to avoid that fate is to run, and keep on running. Run and never look back.'

'I'm Missy,' I replied. 'It's much more 'on brand', as they say.' I even did the air quotes thing, just to really upset him. The chanting increased, whipping up the mystical atmosphere to the Nth degree. I could feel the buzz of the psychic pressure. Humans have little sensitivity to it of course, apart from the odd one here and there, but those sorts are invariably of no use to anyone. Who wants a battery that leaks? I push the psychic wave upwards, towards the ceiling. The last thing we need is anything manifesting down here. The Doctor was right about one thing, which makes me want to kill him again, but I must be gracious and not indulge myself. I could kill him any time I wanted to, but what joy is there in that, especially without any cruelty? 'My plan is almost achieved.'

The energy wave started to flash hyper-blue, then ultraviolet before it finally

dipped into the prismatic section of the EM spectrum. How limited these humans are that they can only see these few wavelengths, not for them are the deep radio waves or the intense gamma rays. Gallifrey has a different star as already mentioned, and it's not even the first. The first one was cannibalised, inverted and then offset against the fabric of reality itself. How grandiose we were, calling it the Eye of Harmony. A black hole in a bottle of amber, and it was anything but harmonious the last time I tried to crack open the seal on that flask. That was several mes ago though, and I was rather... deep-fried, back then. All that matters now is the creation of my new space army and the inevitable conquest of the universe. This galaxy is too small and tame for me now. I've defeated the Cybermen and even the Daleks. I tore the eyestalk from the Dalek Supreme himself, he was ever so boring, so he had to suffer before I killed him. Even the Eternals are but a distraction at best. They're easily distracted with their own petty intrigues, grudges and meaningless wagers. I plan to wipe out galaxy after galaxy. Grind whole super-clusters beneath my heel, and squeeze what remains into oblivion. Only when all that remain surrender to my authority will I relent. Then I shall be a good and benevolent Mistress, and send them on their way too.

There's nothing like genocide to cleanse the palette for bigger and greater crimes. How many other universes are out there? How many parallel realities and alternate histories? Even just one of them is a threat. Until they're all dealt with, I'll never be able to rule over what remains. Until I win, I'll never be able to know that I'm right and that everyone else is very wrong. Of course, they'll all be safely dead, but we must all make sacrifices, and I'm quite prepared to give them all away. I even did a few soubresauts because I was in such a happy mood. Planning a juicy murder or twenty always cheers me up, otherwise you're really just an executioner for the zeitgeist.

These things require a focus for all of those energies. They're eminently disposable, as most people are. This one would never amount to anything, now they're the centre of attention. Am I not kind? Don't I give these sad dreary nobodies a purpose? They should be thanking me for this, but no, my part in all of this goes unremarked – as usual, I might add. At least I know my role and so as the pinnacle arrives, the deed is done. The Doctor was going on and on in the background, but I've been tuning out his broken record for centuries now. After all that tedious screaming is over, I smile with delight as a new creature is born.

'From fire and pain, I have made a new life,' I laugh. 'Am I not a good mother?' I looked at the Doctor. 'Behold, my child, finally something human

that I can be proud of. Now be a dear and kill those others, we don't need them now. They're just standing around, spoiling the atmosphere and gathering dust.'

'What have you done?' The Doctor was still talking, does he do nothing else? I remember when we used to talk about leaving Gallifrey and being more than those dreary old frumps in gowns. Those geriatric gas bags with their rules and their laws and their endless layers of meaningless mediocrity. Cardinals and Castellans, repetitive and derivative customs and rituals. Does anyone know what the role of Gold Usher even is? They are just a charade of tiresome blah-blah-blahs. The meanings behind much of what they do has been lost, only the rituals remain, bereft of reason.

I'd weep for my people, but their staggering stupidity has been helpful to me over the years. They go round and round, like gears in a clock. Endlessly tick-tocking away all the grand accomplishments that they've never achieved. They're sterile, sanitised, and broken, and they call me mad, for wanting to escape that horrifying repetitiousness nil-by-life.

'What have you done, Mast... Missy? That creature won't obey you.'

Oh, he's still here, I thought to myself. I suppose I should answer the fool, at least he might stop talking, but I doubt it. No one thinks they're more righteous than him, and he's always the first to say so.

'Every child loves their mummy,' I quipped, just to see how he'd react. Where was the man who wanted to overthrow the old order and seize the universe for himself? Where is my friend? What happened to make him so wrong and broken inside? Did they break him? Those bastards will burn for how they destroyed such a beautiful mind like that. Everything dies, it's what makes life so easy to destroy. 'Every child wants the silent approval of their mother.' I remember how all bonds had been shattered when I was a child, taken before the Untempered Schism and flooded with the raw power of the cosmos. All I thought I knew was torn away, all bonds of love and loyalty shredded like the lies they are. Still I tried, to make an effort. Yet they were nothing but fools and liars. So in the end, all respect and conditioning to obey were burned away, and I was left with a quiet seething contempt for that whole pantomime of fools.

I had seen then that there was just power, to be seized and wielded. Those who didn't control their destiny were forced to serve the will of others, one way or the other. As a child I went along with their charade of illusions, but I never gave in, I never broke. When I finally had the chance I ran, on my terms. I ran and I never looked back. The universe was too grand and too tempting not to.

All those places to see and practice my powers upon, those who would obey

and those I would destroy for their defiance, like ants underfoot. Oh, how those worlds burned, like sparkling jewels in the night. It was so pretty and sad and beautiful, I wept, I really did. How else could I recognise my own lack of vision? Control and power are of course fun, but the real delights are in suffering and cruelty. The enjoyment of the charade, making people ally themselves to my side, before I betray them, and see that moment of shock on their faces. That is worth everything. Oh, how good I felt, seeing their tiny worthless worlds torn down around them.

‘You’ve done it now,’ the Doctor spoke again, trying to sound like Hedin after a ten-hour lecture on the design aesthetics of the mark three dematerialisation circuit. ‘I warned you not to do this.’

Oh, how the morally oh-so-smug do love to go on. I’ve said it before, all they do is talk, talk, talk. Case in point this one here, with the nauseating stripes and celery. All he does is blether on about shite. They don’t want to do the hard work. No, they just want to make others do it for them. They’re like petty tyrants with their do-gooder conviction, and yet there’s not one spine between them. ‘Warned, warned, warned,’ I pirouetted back over to my darling little captive audience. ‘I’ve done something you’ve never managed to do before, with all your delicious little snackables. I’ve shown you the true face of your boring little pet humans. Look at it, and rejoice.’

‘It will never obey you,’ the Doctor said, still trying in quiet to undo his bonds, as if I couldn’t see him. We’ve both spent plenty of time in prisons. Oh, how you used to love to lock me up, Doctor. How else can a girl perfect the art of escapology? ‘You’ve freed it from any bonds or sense of restraint.’

‘What are you on about?’ I pointed to the hemi-semi-demiurge, its form was twisting in and around itself, as it shed the feckless stink of humanity and grew into something new and better. ‘That’s my boy,’ I grinned like a shark. My newborn child had an irrational number of eyes and was perfect, as it began to expand and explore its surroundings. ‘Now why don’t we show the mean old Doctor just how much better off you are now?’ I was startled and then furious when my little boy picked up the nearest of the surviving human chorus and bit it in half, then he threw the remains at another human, before he squashed the last living one under one of his five hands. ‘Now that’s no way to behave, mummy is very annoyed. We don’t kill people unless it’s with cruelty. We haven’t started our little war yet. I need to recruit more troops, before we can proceed. How would you like that? A little brother or sister to play war with? Good? Yes? Maybe we’ll make the next one...ginger.’ I let my words sink in for

a moment, so the Doctor understood and appreciated the malice behind them.

‘Leave Turlough out of this,’ the Doctor retorted, as I knew he would. He’s so predictable that one. Honestly, he’s no fun when I know how he’ll react to all my little hooks and barbed comments.

‘We’ll see,’ I had no real feelings one way or the other, unless I could use that anxiety to torture my best friend some more. He must know how much I care for him by all the attention I give him. When you’re as old as we are, all the banalities of conversation are as sickening as watching humans shuffling through their dead-man-walking lives. ‘I think that...’

I was interrupted when my boy started to push his way through the roof of the palace. I had stolen this building for my plans, as it was spacious, and I like luxury. Plus, with so many unwitting test subjects nearby it was just good sense. I don’t know what I was thinking of years ago when I’d practically set up base outside that toy soldier factory base and told them my plans in advance. I’m just irked this one walked by my front door, but then I do love a captive audience. Rope is good, but chains are so much better.’

‘Free,’ the Doctor jumped off of the table I’d shackled him too, but that wasn’t my concern as my boy finished breaking through the ceiling, and he climbed out to the roof. ‘We need to bind it back into its original body,’ the Doctor, as usual, has some inane plan. I probably should pay more attention to them at some point as he has a way of charming reality itself to obey his wishes.

‘That mangled husk will never hold him again,’ I replied. ‘He’s outgrown his need for a human body. He’s more of a living idea now.’

‘Ideas can be dangerous,’ the Doctor smiled, then frowned, as if he was having an idea of his own. ‘We need to work fast in any case, to stop it. I suggest we work together. That creature won’t hesitate to turn on you, if you get in its way. Children outgrow their parents, it’s the way of things here on Earth.’

‘My boy will never turn against me.’ After all, I had inputted all the relevant mental commands in the host, before I cut his timeline own and rearranged it to suit my needs. The chanting too had contained trigger words within the harmonies, selected subconscious programming to shape my creature to follow my commands. ‘Let’s come back inside now,’ I shouted up, ‘there’s a good boy. We’ll have a party, with cake and jelly.’

‘It’s not listening to you.’ The Doctor had never looked as slappable as he did right now, with the beginnings of a smirk on his lips. But I was not going to descend to crass vulgarity, I’d never give him the satisfaction.

If the time came to deal with him, well there were better options, most of them

involving anvils and a certain canal in Venice. Machiavelli had been one of the very few humans that I've ever bothered to spend any time with. We delighted each other on a boring Saturday teatime, by executing prisoners together. No, I can't fall into the trap of nostalgia, not right now. 'It wasn't this difficult being a mother, last time' I mused. 'Now come back down here, sweetheart, Mummy's very cross with you.'

'It's not listening,' the Doctor looked about, then ran for the exit. I'd forgotten how quick he was, he spent all his life running away from things. Duty, crime, interesting things. Instead, all he wanted to do was wander like a hobo, with his broken TARDIS and his little pets. 'If only I still had my sonic screwdriver,' the Doctor sighed. 'Then again I can improvise. All we need to do is open a hole in the fabric of spacetime. Anyone can do that with a cheese grater, a sturdy chair and a quantum particle accelerator.'

'I'm fresh out of chairs,' I quipped. 'I do however have something better.' I walked over to the nearby plinth table and picked up my umbrella. 'I should probably do some dancing now, as the world should end with dancing.' I did a quick tap routine that was not at all well-received.

'Millions could die' the Doctor said angrily as he stood in the doorway. I rarely saw that, and it was a welcome surprise. It took a lot to push him that far, and I say that as someone well-versed at pushing his buttons.

The palace was set within a small cloistered garden. Once it had been larger, before the city advanced around it, and consumed it in the name of progress. 'The world rolls and the pages of history turn. People die every day, and you don't make a fuss about them.' Each carved off piece of garden was a reduction in glory and status for the former occupant, but let's just say she's not concerned about that any more. 'Why get upset about some deaths and not others? What's the matter, cat got your tongue?' The poor dear just didn't understand how much I liked its spacious rooms. At least her wardrobe had a few outfits worth wearing, though there's nothing quite as comfortable with what works best for you, and I am very much a winter woman, I've always said so.

'You've created a monster,' the Doctor was preparing himself to give another lecture. I'm going to have to tune him out again, I just know it. Once that keen intellect held promise, but no he put the rock down and gave up on all that he could be. Oh, what a drain he is too, as he sucks all the fun out of everything. All he cares about is trying to tell others how they should act and feel. He's the worst hypocrite of them all, always doing exactly what he shouldn't be doing. No wonder he gets his cannon fodder killed off so often. Those that do wise up

can't run away from him fast enough. Some of them he follows no matter where they run too, as he's eager to continue draining them of every last drop of their essence, like an emotional vampire in sporting attire.

'Come here, sweetheart,' I said to my boy, but he ignored me again and then broke off a piece of a nearby building, and threw it at me. How dare he defy me like that? 'I made you,' I shouted in frustration. 'Mummy's very angry now, and she can unmake you, just as easily as she made you.' Another piece of roof came falling my way and I had to blast it with my umbrella, to divert it away.

'It seems your creation has developed something of a mind of his own,' the Doctor smiled at me.

'Oh shut up,' I replied and aimed my umbrella at the defiant creature again. 'I warned you.' I used the concealed laser screwdriver to open up a rift into the empty howling abyss of the vortex. The creature was pulled towards it, like a spider going down the plughole. 'My child is gone,' I said sadly. 'Earth will tumble on now, into its final blind oblivion. You got what you wanted, now you can gloat.'

'You killed innocent people,' the Doctor snapped at me. He likes to be big and tough when he thinks he can get away with it.

'It's not over yet,' I replied as I got behind him. 'The psychic backwash will ravage anyone in its path.' With that I pushed him towards the blast, and got myself to safety, as quickly as I could. He'd sacrifice billions of my loyal slaves, for the sake of a few snackables at most. So he deserves to suffer for his arrogance.

Revenge is all good and well, but standing over the unconscious body of my best friend I knew all that lay before him. All those deaths and delightful miseries that I've already inflicted upon him. Just for good measure I give him a kick while he's down, nothing serious, nothing permanent. He's still got so much to do and the best sufferings are still to come. Well – why not, another kick won't go amiss, he can put it down to how he fell in the blast, if he ever recalls it, which I doubt. His mind was hit by the full fury of the event and I fear that the psychic wave tore his most recent memories from his brain, pity. I'd have loved to have tortured every last memory fragment of our time together out of him, time lines and all that. He deserves another kick for stealing that from me, and now I have other plans and schemes to pursue.

The basic idea works, it's a bit rough and ready, but once I work out all the problems, I can build myself a new army and try again. The universe is so very chaotic, and while a bad girl like me enjoys some much-needed anarchy, it does

also produce things that only someone with the strength of will to fight them can defeat. Maybe I'll torture a planet or two first, to cheer myself up. They'll thank me for it, suffering make people all the hardier for it. The Doctor would just stand there wringing his hands while he made others die for him, it's what he does best. I'm the real hero here, and don't you forget it.

That political chess piece with the starched and ironed school uniform was looking lost and bedraggled when I dumped the Doctor's prone body at his feet. 'Don't ruin the moment by trying to speak,' I said quickly, and he just nodded. 'He's all yours again now that I've finished playing with him.' I took a step closer, leaning into his personal space. 'Does he know who you are, really? Does he know what you did? The bodies that lay at your feet before they finally caught you? No wonder those old codgers were so interested in you, you're just their type, until he housebroke you. Now take him and run along, back to the TARDIS. You don't want to be anywhere near here when the bombs start exploding. Humans love to watch the suffering of others, even though they'll deny it. I must get rid of the evidence after all, and innocent bystanders make for the best casualties. Do repeat my words exactly to him, when he wakes up. I'm really trying very hard not to kill you right now, and I wish I could see the look of anguish on his face when you do.'

'Come on Doctor,' Turlough hefted his friend up to a seated position, as the mad woman skipped merrily away, waving an umbrella about with psychotic abandon. 'You look like you've been through hell.'

Those dreary fools still think he's their president, so they might just send someone vaguely half-competent to investigate. Better to get rid of everything, fire cleanses all things, especially bodies with awkward fingerprints on them. I could dance with joy, there's so much to do, and still so many people to hurt.

The Third Knock

Kenton Hall

The Doctor had never been one for endings. Miserable, dull things and best avoided.

Frankly, he wasn't quite sure why there always seemed to be so many of them about in the first place. Beginnings were wonderful, obviously, and middles could be surprisingly interesting, but as far as he was concerned, whoever had come up with the idea for endings ought to be shot.

Well, not shot. He'd never been one for shooting either. But certainly offered a hard stare and a wagged finger.

And a biscuit. For promising never to do it again.

Oh, Doctor, he thought, you're getting soft in your old age.

His eyes moved, cloudily, towards the mirror that hung haphazardly on one wall of his workshop. It was smudged with fingerprints, with a handful of – ironic, under the circumstances – cracks reaching out from the edge of the frame.

He let himself, if let was the right word, linger on the face reflected there.

Old age. That was putting it mildly.

It had been centuries since he had worn a body through to its natural conclusion – he was usually far too careless with them – and it still surprised him to see something like his true age on his current set of features.

Which was not to say that it didn't have its benefits. The older you appeared to be, the more eccentric you were allowed to behave without comment. This meant he really had to work at being odd – a good thing, as he felt he'd become a little complacent.

He had noticed that people tended to listen to him more often now, with something like reverence, rather than shouting things like 'He's a madman' or 'Kill the blasphemer.'

That had taken some getting used to.

In fact, everything about his life here on Trenzalore, in the town they called Christmas, had been a readjustment. No TARDIS, no Clara. One town, one planet, one room.

If it hadn't been for the relentless swarms of alien interlopers popping past the Papal defences, in an attempt to prevent - and here the Doctor empathised - the Great Time War from entering a bonus round, he'd have been bored to death, rather than simply ageing in the same direction.

There had been moments when he had felt a surge of anger against his people

for the impossible (that word seemed to follow him like a curse) situation they had put him in. He'd saved them by hiding them in a pocket universe, despite everything they'd put him through, because of the children. But watching children grow on Trenzalore, something else he hadn't done in centuries – loved and cared for by parents whose most sinister machinations were an obsession with providing their offspring with food and shelter – had reinforced to him how poorly his supposedly great race had performed as protectors of the young.

Carting off the next generation at such a tender age, confronting them with the raw power of all of time and space, in full knowledge that none of them would remain unchanged, was hardly an outstanding example of *in parentis loco*. They made Fagin look like Mary Poppins.

And it was immediately after this very thought that the Doctor realised, with a start, the one thing he wanted to do before the end.

It was a very stupid idea, which warmed him to it even further.

He took a year or two to work over the details and ensure that it wasn't simply the molasses-thick sentimentality of old age distorting his thoughts.

No, he could do it. He *should* do it.

Besides, he'd earned it, hadn't he? He'd given the last 900 years of an extraordinarily long life in the service of both his own people and the humans of Christmas. He was owed one last personal effort.

He knew there was an element of selfishness in it, if only because it would make him feel good, but amongst the many people he felt he had failed over the years, there was one that hurt him a fraction more than any other.

And while he couldn't undo everything, couldn't risk changing the past irrevocably, he could, he hoped, take away a little pain and leave a little comfort in its place. Who knew, it might take root one day. It might just open a hidden door that could be walked through, one lost and lonely night.

After that, he'd stared at the crack intently for about six months, between seeing off the Mechanoids and the Jardahl – he hadn't encountered them before, which was exciting, although they were a parasitic race that fed on humanoid sweat glands, so the novelty quickly wore off.

And now the time had come. Every angle had been investigated, every possible outcome pondered. All he had to do was take advantage of the same controversial communications system that had trapped him here – the wretched thing that, despite all of his best efforts, had been utter hell to decorate around.

A little psychic pressure that was all. A little nudge to throw things off-course. A little disruption to a signal that, in a despot-free universe, would never have

been sent.

The slightest shift in rhythm.

The Doctor felt a slow smile flow over his features, illuminating them the way the short-lived daylight of Trenzalore lit up the village outside.

It was a hell of a parting gift, and for a brief, unworthy moment, he chuckled at quite how annoyed his oldest friend and best enemy would be if they ever found out.

‘Handles?’ he said, aloud. ‘You with me?’

In a corner of the workshop, there was a buzz of static as the Cyberman head on whom the Doctor had come to rely slowly fizzed and sparked into life.

‘Affirmative,’ said the mechanised voice.

‘I need you to put up that psychic block now,’ the Doctor said. ‘I mustn’t be disturbed.’

‘Power is too low to maintain such a block for more than ten minutes.’

‘Earth minutes or Trenzalore minutes?’

‘The precise correlation between Earth minutes and Trenzalore minutes is approximately one Earth minute to every sixteen Trenzalore days,’ replied Handles. Somewhat testily, thought the Doctor. They were both getting grumpy in their old age. It was probably for the best he didn’t have another regeneration in him. These things had a nasty habit of transferring over to a new personality.

‘This is why I’m asking.’

‘Earth minutes.’

‘Ah well,’ said the Doctor, with a sigh. ‘It was worth a shot. Still, ten minutes will be plenty. Just enough time to get the signal through.’

He tapped his fingers idly on his desk. One. Two. Three. Here we go.

‘Alright then, throw up the block. There are bound to be some telepaths in orbit. I don’t want any interference.’

‘Affirmative.’

A thought struck the Doctor and he laughed.

‘If you were K-9, that would have been the perfect sentence.’

A pulse of blue energy erupted from the Cyber head and rippled through the room.

‘Psychic block initiated,’ buzzed Handles.

Right then, thought the Doctor, rubbing his hands together.

Time to concentrate.

The Doctor knew something was wrong almost immediately. Partially from experience, to be fair. It was always worth assuming that his plans might go askew in unforeseen ways. That was half the fun of cooking them up in the first place.

But the biggest giveaway was that he was now watching a small boy being led by a party of grim-faced, high-collared Time Lords towards the Untempered Schism.

He was on Gallifrey.

Really didn't see that coming, he thought.

Then two further thoughts arrived in tandem, the same two that always jostled for position whenever he found himself in situations such as this:

'This can't be good,' and 'I can't wait to find out what happens next'.

He threw an experimental look in the direction of his hands. It was a good a way as any to check if he was currently speaking. They were relatively still, for once, but he noted almost immediately that they had regained the bloom of artificial youth. As if by way of answer, they flew to his face or, more specifically, his chin. Same body then, he thought. Same self. That was reassuring.

Actually, was that reassuring?

His brain began to race through the possibilities. The first, obviously, was that he had somehow physically travelled to the pocket universe, via the crack. He dropped to his knees – two knees again, interesting – and scooped up a handful of dry, red sand. He dabbed at it with his tongue and moved the grains around his mouth, like a wine-taster searching for notes of sandalwood.

No, he decided. Not in the pocket universe. Pocket universes had more of a metallic aftertaste. This was, ironically, quite earthy.

So, time travel then? Shouldn't be possible, what with the Time Lock and everything, but he'd left behind a glowing wall crack, a semi-sentient Cyber head and a planet where everyone spoke the truth, so he wasn't going to split hairs.

He pivoted on one heel and took in his surroundings. They were on an isolated plain that he knew far too well. No one forgot this place, whatever effect it had on them. Behind him, as expected, the sun glinted from the looming, though distant, majesty of the Citadel. Not really much help. Time Lords were traditional to a fault. It wasn't as though he was going to be able to tell the time period from the clothing or what season of *Made in Chelsea* was currently showing.

Poor Binky.

He supposed direct exposure to the Vortex might explain the refresh of his physical form, but it would have been far more likely to have removed an arm, or the memory of how to spell Mississippi.

The most likely explanation was that, somehow, his psychic transmission had

been rather too successful – or, indeed, the combination of unknown telepaths overhead and the Time Lord’s desperate transmission had thrown a spanner in the works, and he had made his way to Gallifrey’s past mentally, rather than physically.

But when?

He reached out for a particular mind, one whose presence would definitely narrow things down. ‘Contact,’ he whispered, beneath his breath.

The reply hit him almost immediately, and the Doctor stumbled and spun like an air dancer outside a car dealership. A wave of confusion, of pain, of loss and fear. The pure, untainted emotions of a child.

He shut down the connection immediately, almost by instinct.

It was bad enough running into his adult selves. Meeting himself as a child would be a step too far. That was not a journey he wished to see from the outside. The first time around had been traumatic enough.

Then he heard a name spoken. A name he hadn’t heard in a very long time.

One that all but stopped his hearts.

And suddenly all of his attention was on the boy being led to his destiny. Pitifully small, clearly afraid, in a novice’s black and white robes. Ahead of him, the Schism, a gap in the fabric of reality, framed by the arrogance of Time Lord ingenuity.

This was where it all began. This was the event he had been trying, although not *quite* as directly, to alter.

‘Geronimo,’ he muttered.

‘Sorry to interrupt,’ said the Doctor, idly wondering how a ludicrous expression could have come into such common parlance. Were there actually creatures out there who were sorry to interrupt? Intellectually, he knew there were. The Retiring Seers of Archon IX, for instance, or Canadians. But he still struggled to get his head around the concept.

Interrupting was most definitely cool.

‘I was just wondering,’ he added, made oddly nostalgic by the fierce and uncomprehending glares of the Time Lords in attendance, ‘if I might have a word with my... son before he completes the ritual. There’s been a family emergency, I’m afraid.’

The boy opened his mouth to speak, but the Doctor gave him a look that he hoped conveyed, simultaneously, a plea for trust, a promise of clemency and the possibility of unhealthy food of some description. The thought did occur that, even knowing his

own intentions, this would also be the approach of your common or garden kidnapper, but he decided to brood on that later. For the moment, the important thing was to get the young Master-to-be somewhere other than here, while he worked out what to do for the best.

‘This is most irregular,’ growled one of the Time Lords. A Chancellor, the Doctor thought, from the robes and the tone of aggrieved superiority. The others he recognised vaguely from his Academy days. Tutors, no doubt. He’d done his best to block their faces out over the years, transforming them into a gestalt entity that he’d once described in great detail over dinner with Roald and Quentin. They never quite got the number of arms right, but he could tell it had made an impression.

‘I know, I know,’ said the Doctor, palms held out and upwards in apology. ‘Terribly irregular. Almost intolerably irregular. Like using the wrong fork. Or the word ‘go’, although I suppose that last one only really makes sense in English. It’s just... the boy’s mother has been taken ill. Regeneration imminent, I’m afraid, and I thought the boy should probably see her with her original face before he’s cloistered away at the Academy.’

A stricken look crossed the boy’s face at the mention of his mother, but the Doctor quickly and surreptitiously shook his head. ‘Don’t worry,’ he mouthed, before returning to his charm offensive. To be honest, that description was only 50 percent accurate, but it would have to do.

‘I’ll pop him right back to you,’ he promised. ‘If you think about it, I’m doing you a favour. He’ll be all the better for it. Apron strings cut, mind unburdened of all of those familial ties. Ripe and ready for all the schism’ing and Time Lording you can chuck at him.’

There was a general chuntering from amongst the Time Lords. It was difficult to read, although he knew from experience it was unlikely to be a firm and decisive vote in his favour. It wasn’t an outright refusal either. From what the Doctor could recall, the Master’s father had some influence over the Council, so they were undoubtedly trying to weigh their pride against the possibility of a steep and abrupt fall.

It became clear that nothing was going to be decided quickly, so the Doctor pulled a trick he had always found unreasonably successful. He pretended they’d said ‘yes’ and acted accordingly.

‘Come along, son,’ he said, striding forward and laying a hand on the boy’s shoulder. ‘Sooner you see your poor, sick mother, the sooner we can have you back here and well on your way to becoming a proper Time Lord.’

The boy looked up at him from beneath his dark, rather severe, fringe. That glint

was already there, the Doctor thought with a mixture of sadness and wonder. The intelligence and the guile. Everything that had drawn him to the Master from the moment they'd first met.

Had they met yet? He struggled to recall. From the fleeting connection he'd had to his youngest self, he suspected not. He hadn't felt the balm of friendship anywhere in that tortured psyche.

He felt the boy's gaze increase in intensity, jolting him from his reveries. Was he imagining it or had one of his eyebrows just hiked itself up by a fraction?

'Yes, father,' said the Master, in a calm, even tone.

'So,' said the Doctor, as casually as he felt able. 'Tell me about yourself.'

'I'm a Time Lord,' said the boy, thrusting his chin forward proudly. 'Or, at least, I'm going to be.' He looked crestfallen for a moment. 'At least, I *was* going to be.'

They were sitting on a hillside, about a mile's walk from the Schism, the rich, orange sky of evening glowing over their heads. The Doctor was trying very hard not to get lost in the sight. It was a very long time since he had set foot on a Gallifrey untouched by war. And even longer since it had felt like home.

'A Time Lord, eh?' he said, gazing straight ahead. 'Sounds important.'

The boy stared at him and, once again, he felt a twinge in the base of his neck that absolutely was not the hairs standing on end. Mind you, he wouldn't swear to it in a court of law. Which, considering his record and the fact that he appeared to have inadvertently kidnapped a child, could be exactly where he was headed.

'You do *know* what a Time Lord is, don't you?' his new charge asked, accusingly.

Not in the slightest, thought the Doctor. Not anymore.

'Yes,' came the somewhat defensive response. 'I'm just not sure why anyone would be in a rush to become one. All that dressing up and looking miserable and refusing to interfere in anything.' He shuddered involuntarily.

'What are you, then?' The boy narrowed his eyes and lowered his voice. 'Are you a Shobogan?'

The Doctor sighed. How was it that the overseers of all of space and time could still manage to drink from the poisoned chalice of prejudice?

'Yes, that's me,' he said, sternly. 'Shobogan through and through.'

'From *outer* Gallifrey?' The boy's face had taken on that intensely interested look that small children get when confronted with anything they've been taught to see as beyond the pale.

‘The wastelands? Yes, I suppose you could say that. What about you, young Time Lord?’

‘My father is a very important man.’

‘I remem... I mean, so I’ve heard.’

‘Have you stolen me for ransom then?’

‘No. Whatever gave you that idea?’

‘Oh.’

The boy seemed almost disappointed.

‘If I recall,’ the Doctor added, ‘you came along willingly. So, the real question is: if you’re so keen to become a Time Lord, why did you run away? You weren’t... I don’t know, *afraid* were you?’

The not-yet-Master jumped to his feet, outraged.

‘I’m not afraid of anything.’

‘Oh,’ said the Doctor, nodding. ‘I see. You’re an idiot.’

‘What?’

‘It’s just I’ve met a few people in my time who weren’t afraid of anything and the one thing they all had in common was that they were a bit...’ He tapped the side of his head meaningfully.

‘A Time Lord has to be brave,’ said the boy, suddenly unsure of himself.

The Doctor nodded.

‘I’m sure that’s true. But bravery is a very different thing to not being afraid. And much, much cooler.’

They locked eyes, and the Doctor found himself sorely tempted to reach out into that young mind, find that dark little ember, destined to crackle into a deadly flame, and snuff it out. But he knew that wouldn’t fix anything. He’d simply be removing the choice and without that, it would be meaningless. He could mitigate but he could not mend. That wasn’t his place.

His place.

The elder Time Lord fell silent for a moment, his eyes fixed on the horizon. This had never been his place. He’d tried, he really had. Once, he’d been as desperate as the Master to shimmy into those robes and that ridiculous collar... to be important, to prove that he belonged. It hadn’t lasted. Whatever had crawled under his skin the day he faced the Schism, had set him on a path, the end of which he was only now reaching. Back on Trenzalore.

‘I’d have been afraid,’ he said softly. ‘If it were me about to look into all of time and space.’

The young Master looked surprised.

‘Oh, it’s not that,’ he said. ‘That’s nothing. I... I was... I was afraid because I thought I might not come back. Like the others.’ It was an admission the Doctor realised he had never heard the Master make, and likely never would again.

‘Well, I can understand that...’ the Doctor began, before the words settled into his brain in the correct order.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘What others?’

The Doctor had listened carefully to the young Master’s story, audited it for childish hyperbole, then put 50 percent of that back into play – children saw things adults ignored – and now he knew, at least, that something was rotten in the state of Gallifrey. This was no huge shock of course, the Time Lords had long ago transformed bureaucratic corruption into an art form and then overcharged for the exhibit.

But to actively harm their own children, the future of their race? That seemed beyond even their banal insensitivities. It’s not as though they were particularly kind to children, but the passive-aggressive stance they favoured did rather require their will-broken juniors to remain alive in order to take their own revenge on the subsequent generation.

Nonetheless, if the Master were to be believed – now there was a sentence – far more children were taking the trip to the Schism ritual than were making the return journey. This was as disturbing as it was on the nose thematically, the Doctor mused. Not everyone had ever made it back in one piece, he acknowledged to himself, but they didn’t tend to disappear entirely.

He’d tried very diligently – for whole seconds – to convince himself that, as a psychic projection into his own past, it behoved him to tread lightly.

Then he’d placed his hand on the shoulder of his oldest friend and made him an unwise promise.

‘Everything is going to be fine. Trust me,’ he said. ‘I’m the D...’

No. That might be a step too far. Causality-wise.

‘The D?’ asked the boy.

‘I hadn’t finished,’ said the Doctor. ‘What I meant to say was: ‘Trust me. I’m the... Dean.’

He reached into his jacket pocket, with more confidence than the circumstances warranted, and was pleasantly surprised to discover exactly what he was looking for.

The Doctor flipped open the psychic paper and flashed it quickly.

The Master's eyes narrowed.

'Dean of Temporal Criminology,' he read. 'You're from the Academy?'

The Doctor's wrist flicked the paper towards his own furrowed brow, then he nodded.

'That's right.'

'There isn't a department of temporal criminology at the Academy.'

'That you know of.'

'What is temporal criminology?'

'The study of time-related crimes. And poetry. You'd be surprised how often they crossover.'

'And what's a Dean?'

The Doctor tutted.

'What are they teaching you? It's a sort of high-level tutor. Overseeing...' he flapped his arms around in an all-encompassing gesture, '... well, everything.'

'Then why don't you already know what's going on?'

'I've been on sabbatical,' the Doctor said quickly, holding up a hand to stem further questions. 'Now, do you want to check my references or do you want to find out what's happening to your friends?'

The Master's face darkened.

'I never said they were my friends.'

'That's a shame. Friends are good.'

'My father says friends are a distraction.'

'Your father's right. That is definitely one of the best things about them.'

The boy's eyes brightened. He'd never heard anyone challenge his father's authority before, even if it were backhandedly.

'Now,' said the Doctor. 'One of the very best ways I know to make friends is to save their lives from nameless evil. So why don't we give that a shot and see where we end up?'

He extended his hand and the boy took it. Both felt a small jolt of static electricity.

'What was that?' asked the Master, though he didn't pull away.

'A very good sign,' said the Doctor. And hoped that he was right.

Classrooms the universe over have one thing in common: a disappointed atmosphere.

Not an atmosphere *of* disappointment, although there is often an element of that as

well. The students were disappointed to find themselves there, the teachers were disappointed by both the glazed looks on their pupils' faces and their own inability to draw them back into the room.

No, it was the atmosphere itself that always felt disappointed. The room had been built, sometime in the distant past, to house the electricity of learning and the elixir of knowledge. In its initial emptiness, it had longed for them to fill its corners and its secret spaces. Instead, it got the boredom of bodies itching to be released.

It always surprised the Doctor how few beings sensed the sentience of rooms. A defence mechanism, he surmised, to prevent them thinking about how much they saw and heard.

This classroom, at the back of which he and the Master stood now, was rife with disillusionment. This emotion was lent added heft by the presence of the two dozen or so young Gallifreyans, their telepathic powers unruly and fed by nerves. They sat, straight-backed and uncomfortable, in front of their elderly lecturer as he extolled the virtues of non-interference in a sandpaper-dry voice. It was a large, domed room with two inclines of pews separated by a long, red-carpeted aisle and capped at the far end by an enormous circular dais, from which the tutor's words trickled.

He recognised the speaker vaguely, the way one did with old teachers. The voice was definitely familiar, although vacuous monotones were not exactly in short supply amongst the Academy's teaching staff.

It was all exactly how the Doctor remembered. Nothing being said and nothing being learned. The students simply held still long enough to be fastened into the mould.

'There is one question you must always ask yourself,' the voice droned.

'Have I,' he continued finally, 'the right?'

The Doctor's eyes dropped to his boots. Okay, so he may have picked up one or two things. Bound to happen.

The Master tugged at his sleeve.

'Aren't you going to do something?' he hissed. 'This is the next group. They face the Schism tomorrow.'

'I am doing something,' whispered the Doctor. 'I'm paying attention.'

'Watching,' muttered the boy. 'Everyone's always *watching*.'

He was right, thought the Doctor. It was what they instilled into you here. Not caution before action, but suspicion of action. Thankfully, he had been a *terrible* student.

'And counterpoint!' he exclaimed, already halfway down the long aisle. He spun as he talked, somehow managing to address his speech to each of the students in

turn.

‘Now, don’t get me wrong. There’s a lot of wisdom in what you’ve just heard. Of course, there is. I mean, look at the source. He’s clearly been around a bit. You don’t get that... papery without a few miles on the clock.’

There was uneasy laughter from the students, and the Doctor grinned.

‘Excuse me, young man,’ sputtered the tutor, attempting to draw himself up to his full height, but succeeding only in disappearing further into his collar and headpiece, like a particularly swanky turtle.

‘You’re excused,’ said the Doctor. ‘You don’t know any better, after all. I mean, it was only ten or eleven regenerations ago that you were sat where they are now. Wondering what was so awful about the universe that everyone seemed to want to keep it from you. Or...’ he paused meaningfully, ‘what was so awful about you that you needed to be kept from the universe.’

He flipped out the psychic paper once more, careful to avoid the tutor’s eyes. A mature Time Lord would see right through the trick, but it wasn’t mature Time Lords he was attempting to rally. It was Gallifreyan children, in fear of their lives.

‘Dean of Temporal Criminology,’ he announced. ‘And I’m here to ask a few questions.’

‘Temporal Criminology?’ the Time Lord teacher mocked. ‘No such thing.’

The Doctor gave him a hard stare.

‘Now, we both know that’s not true.’

He took a step towards him and the temperature in the room dropped by several degrees. The tutor tried to hold his ground, but his legs appeared to be arguing amongst themselves. The Doctor kept moving forward, leading with his chin and his outrage.

‘I have been made aware,’ he said, addressing the class, but keeping his eyes burrowed deep into the elderly man in front of him, ‘that some children have recently gone missing. We take that sort of thing very seriously in my department...’

‘Your department?’ the teacher managed.

‘My department, yes. I have a department. The Department of Temporal Criminology. We have a crest and everything. Over the door. Very official.’

The Doctor paused, straightened and adjusted his bow tie.

‘So,’ he said, ‘are we going to do this the easy way, or the hard way?’ He swivelled back to the Master, who was watching with open mouth from the back of the room. ‘Raymond Chandler taught me that.’ A look of doubt crossed his face. ‘Or was it Dorothy Parker?’ Back to the bewildered teacher now. ‘Now that was a hangover. The Kardollian royal family didn’t know what hit them. Stopped a war though.’

‘Dean?’

The Doctor glanced over his shoulder, where the Master was giving him the seemingly universal ‘get on with it’ plea. He’d have been tapping his wrist if it would have meant anything here.

‘Yes,’ he said, pulling himself back into the present. ‘What do you have to say for yourself?’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ the lecturer insisted. ‘I don’t know anything about any missing children.’

‘That seems a little irresponsible,’ said the Doctor. ‘If you don’t mind me saying so.’

‘I handle intake. New students. I prepare them for the Vortex and for the centuries ahead. Once they leave here, they’re out of my purview.’

‘Out of sight, out of mind?’

Without realising it, the Doctor’s hands appeared to have curled into fists, around the fabric of the teacher’s robes. He wondered how that had happened.

‘You mean it as an insult,’ said the lecturer, gathering what was left of his pride, ‘but we all have our duties. We all have our *place*.’

There was that word again. Place. Knowing one’s place. The kind of thinking that had led him, led the Master, to the stars. Both had sought to escape such restraints, but had they really managed it? Maybe they’d just found another place in the scheme of things, both of them, that they found equally difficult to shake off.

But that’s why he was here, wasn’t it? Okay, his initial plan had been simpler – knock a drumbeat askew, add a touch of healing jazz to his old friend’s internal landscape. It had appealed as a choice, he now saw, because he would never have to know if it had worked. He could have gone to his rest, in his tomb on Trenzalore, convinced he’d done all he could, with hope in his hearts and no pesky facts to disrupt it.

Now he had a real chance to set the Master on a different path. Or, at very least, to show him another way. A way that, one day, when another plan for universal domination had been thwarted, he might just give a go, out of pure desperation... or as a memorial to the dear departed Doctor and his interminable moral high ground.

He felt the young Master’s eyes on the back of his head. On, he thought, or in. A small roil of hatred, still gathering speed but recognisable, nonetheless, skittered around the edges of his psychic defences.

The Doctor released his grip on the lecturer’s robes and stepped back.

‘These children will spend centuries here,’ he said calmly. ‘You might just try making that tolerable for them.’

‘Why did you let him go?’ complained the Master as they stormed from the building into the outer courtyard. He was finding it difficult to keep up with the Doctor’s long strides, informed as they were by frustration, both at the situation and his own loss of control. ‘Why didn’t you make him tell you what you wanted to know?’

The Doctor stopped and turned.

‘What did you want me to do?’

‘Make him tell you.’

‘Make him how?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You do. You have a picture in your mind. I can see it. And I don’t like it.’

The boy ignored this.

‘He could have something to do with it.’

‘He could be completely innocent.’

‘Innocent?’ shouted the boy. ‘How is he innocent? Standing in there, filling their heads with all of that claptrap about responsibility and non-interference and the glorious history of the Time Lords. If he didn’t take them, then they probably ran away. Out of pure boredom.’

The Doctor raised an eyebrow.

‘Those are big words for such a small boy.’

The Master fell silent.

‘Are they yours?’ The Doctor took a swing. ‘Or your father’s?’

More sullen silences.

‘You knew I was coming, didn’t you? You put on this show for my benefit.’ He was reaching now, but there was a tickle at the back of his brain, a sneeze that refused to come out. He’d fallen for it again. Perhaps all those speechifying megalomaniacs with whom he’d sparred were right after all. Mercy was his greatest weakness. ‘Why? So I’d take a swing at one of your teachers? Is it as simple and boring as that? Getting someone to do your dirty work for you?’

‘My father is away on business. He’s always away on business.’

‘Are we answering questions out-of-order now? Because, let me tell you, I don’t think either Ronnie would be thrilled with your performance.’

‘It wasn’t my father who told me to find you.’

‘Okay. Getting somewhere. Who was it then?’

‘My mother.’

The Doctor shook his head.

‘Your mother died. When you were very young.’ He tried to put this as gently as possible, but his temper was starting to get the better of him. This was not the last hurrah he’d promised himself. The boy didn’t question how the Doctor knew, but his eyes lit up in triumph.

‘She said you’d say that. But she came home.’

‘As you remembered her?’

‘She’d regenerated. That’s why she’d been away for so long. It had been a difficult change and she’d had to go away. For treatment.’

‘She told you this.’

‘Yes.’

‘And you believed her? How old were you when she... left?’

‘Two.’

‘Six years is a long time to be dead. I did a few hours once and I ended up thinking I was some sort of poet.’

‘It’s her. I *knew* it was her.’ The Master’s voice had the insistence of someone who needed a fact to be true more than they believed it.

Oddly, the Doctor felt his mood begin to settle. He’d had one mystery taken away, but another had been neatly set in its... no, not place. Not that again. In its stead.

‘What about the children? Have any really disappeared?’

‘Yes.’

‘Right...’

‘But I know where they are.’

‘Let me guess. With your mother?’

The boy nodded.

‘Well, then,’ said the Doctor. ‘In that case, I suppose you’d better take me home for tea.’

The woman who met them at the gates of the Master’s family estate did, for what it was worth, look the part. Dark hair, piercing eyes, clearly mad as a box of bees. She was wearing a dark, casual robe, with a glittering headpiece of a velvet-like material that had clearly been custom-made. The word ‘bejazzled’ rattled around the back of the Doctor’s mind, until he told it quite firmly to stop.

‘My boy!’ she said, effusively, throwing her arms around the young Master and folding him into a tight embrace. ‘I’ve worried for you so. What on Earth would a

mother do if her dear child came to any harm? Oh, the thought of it alone makes one quite peaky.'

Her eyes flicked, reptile-like, to the Doctor.

'Oh, I see you've brought along a little playmate. How charming. Big for your age, aren't you?'

'I brought him,' said the boy, pulling away from the woman's grip. 'Just like you asked. I made you come, didn't I, Doctor?'

The Doctor felt a wave of sadness roll over him, tempered by a guilty pang of relief. Perhaps it had always been too late to save him.

The woman ducked down onto one knee and looked the boy straight in the eye.

'You did. You're a very good boy. I'm proud of you.'

Then she straightened, brushing the dust from her robes and adjusting her hair, as though the burst of emotion had been accidental and ought to be disregarded.

'Now, go and join your playmates. I'll be along presently,' she said, waving him off.

The Master turned and smiled, genuinely happy in a way that the Doctor could not recall having seen before.

'Goodbye, Doctor.'

'Goodbye.'

The Master ran off, towards distant sounds of shrieking and laughing.

'Now,' the woman said, 'what can I do for you... Doctor, was it? If it's about the missing children, I can save us both a lot of time and bother and tell you that they're here. Perfectly safe, in absolute no danger whatsoever.'

'In no danger of what?'

'Of becoming Time Lords, silly. I mean, it's not as if we need any more of those pompous layabouts clogging up the Academy system and preventing more deserving candidates from making their way up the political ladder.'

'Candidates like your son?'

The woman smiled.

'My son, yes.'

'You always wanted a son,' said the Doctor.

Glee lit up the woman's face and she did a little twirl on the spot, a task made no easier by her outfit.

'You remembered, Doctor. How charming. I always did regret not getting to meet you when you were wearing this face. You seemed as though you might be jolly good fun. And that chin. Photographs just don't do it justice. Not even the 3-D ones. Although they can give you a start.'

‘What are you doing here?’

‘*That’s* what you’re going with? Not how did you escape the Time War? Or I see you’re a woman now, it suits you? How did you know it was me, by the way? Used to be I could stick on a false nose and you’d be none the wiser for simply ages. Why the first time we met like this... but, no... spoilers.’

The Doctor bristled at that last word.

‘Master,’ he began.

Missy shook her head.

‘Not Master. Not at the moment. Why not call me... Mom?’

‘You shouldn’t be here. In your own past. In Gallifrey’s past. It shouldn’t even be possible.’

‘Excuse me while I nip into the kitchen. I’m sure I can rattle up a pot and a kettle. Although,’ Missy rustled a hand beneath her robe and extracted a vicious-looking device.

‘Sonic?’

‘Laser.’

‘Screwdriver?’

‘Knife.’

She thrust her arm out and pressed a button on its side. It whirred and beeped and pinged before she drew it back to her face.

‘Ah. Psychic projection. Fascinating. And in a fully corporeal form, no less. You’ve outdone yourself, Doctor.’

‘Let those children go.’

‘I’m afraid not, Doctor. You see, I think you’ve misjudged me. A lot has happened since last we met. I’m not here to cause trouble. I’m here to prevent it.’

‘For yourself, no doubt.’

‘Absolutely,’ said Missy. ‘I don’t deny it. You see, it’s been brought to my attention by someone... let’s say someone close to me, that, just perhaps, I’ve been running around in circles for a fair few lives now. So I thought I might pop back and see if I couldn’t nudge things in a different direction. Nothing strictly against the Laws of Time before you get yourself all het up. Maybe a few Misdemeanours of Time, but I think you’d find yourself without a leg to stand on arguing against that.’

She looked him up and down.

‘Still have the two legs, do we?’

‘For the moment.’

‘Trenzalore. I knew it. Oh, Doctor, you’ve some surprises in store. But I’ve said too much.’

She held a hand over her mouth, coyly.

The Doctor felt a flicker of something like hope in his gut. Was he going to survive? Were there further lives to come?

No, how could there be? Just the Master playing his, *her*, usual mind games.

‘So, you’re here to what?’ he asked, as much to distract himself as anything. ‘Give yourself the childhood you never had?’

‘Well, that might be pushing the boat out a bit. I don’t plan to stick around quite that long. No, just one glorious summer. Friends, family and a kind word or two. A break from all of the ambition and the striving and...’ She reached forward and tapped him gently on the chest. ‘...the bad company he’ll begin to keep before too long.’

‘What do you hope to accomplish? You’re not trying to rehabilitate yourself?’

‘Goodness me, no. The very idea. But the Time Lords did put that nasty little earworm in my head and if there’s one thing I can’t tolerate, it’s that lot poking around in there. I’m just freeing up a little space. Which begs the question, what are you doing here? As if I didn’t know, you sentimental old thing.’

‘How did you know?’

‘Like I said, a lot has happened since we last met. All I’m saying is, make sure you don’t tell that bothersome Ms Oswald all about your little plan to help an old friend. We don’t want the timelines getting any more tangled than necessary.’

The Doctor shook his head. This was getting... messy.

‘I can’t let you just keep those children. Whatever you say your intentions are.’

‘Oh, you can. And you will. Don’t worry your pretty head about it. A few months and they’ll wander back to the Academy, looking a little dazed and claiming to have heard the words of Rassilon in the desert or some such mystic nonsense. They’ll be feted and fawned over for years to come.’

‘I’m sorry. I have to stop you.’

‘Oh, Doctor,’ Missy said, tipping her head gently to one side. ‘I’ve waited so long for this moment and now I can’t even enjoy it properly. I’m afraid, this time, you’re not going to win. It... simply isn’t your place.’

Missy held up her sonic knife and activated it. There was a high-pitched squeal and the world began to concertina into waves of bright, orange light. The Doctor threw his hands to his ears against the noise, but Missy’s parting shot drove directly into his brain.

‘It’s all just beginning for you and me, Doctor. In fact, I may invite you round for supper tomorrow. Get the ball rolling. Get you out of that old barn for a night, anyway. And don’t you fret. I promise I’ll say something nice.’

And then the blackness came.

The Doctor awoke in his workshop, the dull glow from the crack staring back at him with, it seemed, some amusement.

‘It was worth a try,’ he said, grumpily.

‘Affirmative,’ replied Handles.

‘Ah, shut up.’

He moved to get out of his chair and was briefly surprised by his body’s refusal to fully cooperate. So easy to forget one had grown old. Especially when it hadn’t previously been an issue.

It hadn’t worked. He’d tried to give the Master a moment’s peace and it hadn’t worked. But he had tried. He’d done what he could. He felt the memories growing fuzzier by the second. Something about a woman. Mary Poppins? No, that couldn’t be right.

He had done something. Hadn’t he?

What had he done?

Senility, Doctor. It was bound to happen, eventually. You’re just a silly old Doctor who has silly old dreams. Dredging up the past because the future is growing shorter by the moment.

Still, for now, he had a job to do. People to protect. As long as he had that there was no time for dreaming.

‘I hope you know what I’ve done for you,’ he said, gesturing at the crack with the sonic screwdriver he hadn’t even realised he’d picked up.

He activated it, as much from habit as anything. And a familiar signal filled the room. One he’d been listening to for so many years now, trying to build a final windmill at which to tilt.

But there it was. Still present. Still criss-crossing the vortex from the mind of a maniac to the mind of, well, another maniac.

Da-da-da–

Four beats. Driving a small boy mad.

Da-da-da–

Four beats. Thrusting a desperate man out into the stars.

Da-da-da–

‘Handles? The last time I ran a competency scan, I could still count to four, couldn’t I?’

‘Affirmative.’

The Doctor settled back in his chair, set down the screwdriver and picked up a small toy on which he’d been working earlier. He’d nearly got the antigravs sorted and he’d worked out how to balance the axle load.

A beat of three, instead of four. It wasn’t much. It wasn’t a guarantee. He couldn’t even quite explain it to himself.

But as final dances went, a waltz with an old friend was hard to beat.

Master Brightside

Gerard Power

The song pulses and quickens, filling the air... the bordello throngs with colour and motion... and on the edge of the dancefloor, the Master reclines in his red leather armchair – the best seat in the house. To his left, beneath the hanging golden swans, the house band play on their glittery red-gold stage. To his right, between two great lions carved from stone, sits a nest of crimson velvet loveseats, where the showgirls attend to their tuxedoed patrons.

He scans for her – his favourite. She sits alone in her pale green shift, eyes glazed over, twirling an idle finger through her voluminous white-blonde hair. The Master tosses an apple to her, and she snaps to attention, catches it, blinking. He nods an instruction, and she goes dutifully to the gentleman opposite her – the balding one with the white gloves – and takes his hand, leads him away.

The Master turns his gaze to the stage. The guitarist, the cellist, the drummer – they have their heads down, absorbed in the music. But the singer – he pretends not to see her walk off... pretends not to care... throws himself into the song. He just can't look – it's killing him – and that's the way the Master likes it. He watches how it feeds the performance, savours that tasty edge of loneliness, the zest of spite.

The Master has acquired a taste for indie rock. The song never ends.

The low dome set within its square stone dais looked strange now on the clear white floor of the TARDIS chamber. The aperture was a frivolity – a relic of a dead time.

The warrior finished fastening the diving suit, an armoured case of brass and Leviathan leather. It rendered him stiff and slow, but he would be needing it.

The gales where he was going could cut a man to the very soul.

He lifted the cryogenic cube from the edge of the dais, held it in the blue light of the sensor. He wondered for a moment about what was frozen inside the little glass box. Whether the Time Lords had grown it. Harvested it.

No. The mission.

The dome split in two, with a sound like grinding stone. Thick white steam plumed from the yawning crevice, pulsating with blue light – the howl of the

void.

The Eye of Harmony was open.

A nanofibre umbilical cable ran from the front of the suit through the winch of dwarf-star alloy that lay pinned by gravity to the TARDIS floor. The cable terminated in a pulsing bellows that provided him with a steady stream of oxygen. No probe had returned from the Eye unmelted; it was not certain that any matter at all could survive within the nuclear chaos.

He set foot on the dais, approached the edge. The open Eye was a rounded well of thick white fog, throbbing with blue lightning, roiling like shackled sky.

Turning his back on the storm, he fixed his grip on the cable and stepped backwards off the edge.

The Time Winds pelted and rocked him – all he could see was the formless light, whirling and coruscating, beating against his rounded glass faceplate – but Leviathans dwelt in the Outer Dark, and their bristling hide was adamant: the suit held. Gripping the cable, he kicked hard against the rock wall and rappelled down, down, down the harmonocular gullet.

Torrid gales rose and fell. Sometimes he found himself swinging pendulous and helpless against the rocklike walls, but he held on tighter, waited it out, and snatched every instant of calm. There could be no frailty, no mistakes. This was a time of war, and he had his orders.

A squall of light sent him spinning. His stomach swooped. He grasped at the cable, tried to orientate himself – but his boots were too heavy, they couldn't find purchase, and it was unspooling wildly. Turbid light vanished and he hurtled through dark – braced for oblivion.

He thudded to a floor of hard stone, a tangled heap of cable piling upon him.

Still alive.

So be it.

He rose, aching, to his feet and looked around him.

He was stood in a false city. The terraced streets were low, dark but for a scattering of lit windows. The place felt like Earth – felt vaguely European, vaguely *fin de siècle* – but it was not Earth. It lacked particularity. The shops and houses looked flat and half-textured, low on detail, like the backdrop of an ancient video game.

The roads were completely empty. No figures stood framed at the lit windows. The only sound was distant, muffled music.

He looked up, craning his neck as far as the diving suit would allow. White stars dotted the purple sky, twinkling and dancing. They looked impossibly,

dizzily close, as if the sky were only a few dozen yards away.

The cable hung like a conjuror's rope, vanishing a few feet into the air. He pulled it experimentally, and it held – still connected to the TARDIS. A firm triple tug and the winch would reel him back up. Optimistically.

He focused on the music. He couldn't make out the lyrics. It was like standing a few streets over from an arena concert: it was loud enough, or the world quiet enough, that he could hear it even from within his suit. The song was fast and energetic, an upbeat drums-and-guitar rhythm that contrasted interestingly, unusually, with the insistent, plaintive vocals of a male tenor.

He followed his ears.

One of the girls – the one with the blue skin and the tiara – is giving a lap dance to one of the patrons – the big guy with the goatee – but he looks a little tired, a little bored. The Master wonders if he should shuffle the partners again to liven things up.

The foyer door slams open, and a figure steps into the club.

Shock ripples through the room. Girls and patrons freeze mid-nuzzle. The band almost miss a beat.

The figure is bulky and lumbering. An astronaut crossed with a vintage Chanel bag.

It's an absurd entrance. Grandiose and discordant. Sublimely tasteless.

There's only one person it can be.

The Master tosses an apple to one of the girls and points at the gate-crasher. They lunge for him as if they've rehearsed it – dancing around him, circling in, slender hands grasping and twisting until his helmet window is smothered in lace and showgirl feathers. He tries to retreat, but he's slow and heavy – and he can't, or won't, fight them.

The diving suit is dismantled, and the girls carry away the scraps, the helmet, the cable. The intruder looks panicked, but relaxes a little once he realises the air is breathable and he's not dissolving.

He's wearing a jacket of fresh dark leather. The Master doesn't recognise the body – slight and slender, a head of thick brown curls, his face young, with an amusing hint of stubble – but there's no mistaking those sullen, ancient little eyes.

The Master rises to his feet. Walks up to him.

And wraps him in an enormous bear hug.

‘Doctor!’ he declares. ‘How *have* you been? Red Bordeaux or white?’

‘It’s...’ he replies stiffly, ‘good to see you, old friend.’ His voice is raspy – it doesn’t suit his face, but it suits who he is.

The Master ushers him to a high-backed yellow chair beside his own – there’s a checkers board on the little table between them. The Doctor moves like a sigh. He accepts the wine with an air of ponderous duty, and eyes the Master darkly, taking in his middle-aged, clean-shaven face, his broad frame, his burgundy velvet robe.

‘I gotta say, I love the new look,’ the Master tells him. ‘Very... ‘young Quentin Crisp’.’

‘And you look well-preserved,’ says the Doctor, ‘given the circumstances. I expected to find you burnt to a ‘crisp’ yourself.’

The band hasn’t stopped, but they’ve taken the volume down a notch – just right for conversation. It’s a delight to finally have another real person here – a real mind. To see him again.

‘So,’ the Master says, ‘how’s the universe been doing without me?’ His American accent sounds strange to him, now – it’s been a while since he’s even heard an English one.

‘We’re at war.’

This is a surprise. ‘You’re not here to arrest me?’

The Doctor looks startled. ‘Your crimes are nothing. The past is a different country.’

The Master is listening.

‘Some are calling it the Time War,’ says the Doctor. ‘The Last Great Time War.’

It’s a litany of horrors. He tells gravely of the abstract struggle between Time Lord and Dalek, and the things born or unleashed in the crossfire. He speaks of Nightmare Children and Could’ve-Been Kings. He speaks of Sol Nyder, and of the dreadful shape found buried beneath the Blood Spire of the Final Romana. His eyes are hollow and haunted, his rasping, received-pronunciation delivery as perfectly crafted as an old thespian’s soliloquy.

‘Sounds bad,’ says the Master.

The Doctor reaches beneath his jacket, pulls something from his bandolier. It’s a little glass vial.

‘Mutagenic elixir,’ he says. ‘Brewed specially for you by the Sisterhood of Karn, at the order of the High Council.’

The Master frowns.

‘This will trigger your regeneration. It will give you the body you need – the body you deserve – and augment your very mind. It will make you a warrior.’

The Master narrows his eyes slowly into a squint.

‘Don’t you want a proper body?’ the Doctor asks, exasperated. ‘A new regeneration cycle!’

The Master raises his eyebrows in offence. ‘I happen,’ he says, ‘to like this body.’

‘It’s a human body!’ the Doctor says, incredulous. ‘Which you stole! It was practically rotting off the last time I saw you!’

‘It’s not rotting now,’ the Master says, and cracks his knuckles. ‘I make the rules here. Besides,’ he slaps a hand to the left side of his chest, ‘you really get used to the one-heart beat. You should try it sometime.’

The Doctor scans the club, his eyes lingering on the patrons and the dancers, as if expecting someone to come back him up.

‘What do you see me doing out there, exactly?’ the Master asks. ‘Hypnotising Daleks? Shrinking them into little action figures? Come on.’

The Doctor looks weary. When he finally speaks, it’s like he’s puppeteering himself from the outside, forcing every syllable. ‘We need you, Master. The contours of your mind. The curiosities in your biodata. There is no-one in the universe like you. You’re invaluable.’

The Master holds up a finger. ‘Shhh – I love this part.’ It’s a short drum fill, leading into a final verse, and he nods along as the singer comes back in: ‘*Jealousy...*’

The Doctor gives him a moment.

‘I am asking as your friend, your comrade, your countryman. I’m not even asking you to want this: just to drink. You will become someone whose nature is War. You will no longer *want* to hide. That is the beauty of it.’ He leans in. ‘This war needs everything we have. We believe you can turn the tide.’ He holds out the vial. ‘I’ve already taken mine. I’m not the Doctor any more. The universe doesn’t need one. Nor does it need a Master. But it needs you.’

‘*Paramedic, treat thyself,*’ the Master muses. ‘Mmm. Nah.’

‘The children of Gallifrey need us,’ the Doctor insists, a shrill edge creeping into his voice. ‘The existence of our universe depends on our actions. You can’t *dilly-dally*.’

‘Universes rise and fall. Why get hung up? There’s plenty more where that came from.’ The Master softens. ‘No. No more fighting, no more schemes. No

more. I'm retired. All those years on Earth, struggling, failing, chasing regenerations... it was time to move on. Now I've got a place where I can really be the Master. And I've been doing just fine.'

'But you can't hide forever in this...' He gestures in helpless revulsion. 'This *pop video*!'

'If you don't like my club, make your own.' The Master snatches an apple from thin air, its skin thick and red and juicy, and takes a bite. 'Live a little,' he says, his mouth full. 'Thoughts shape energy into matter here. Took me years to get the hang of it, but I can show you the ropes.' He leans in, smiling. 'What does your world look like, Doctor?'

The Doctor surges to his feet and dashes the little table aside, sending red and yellow checkers clattering across the dancefloor.

He was furious. He could accept enmity. He could respect the Master as a foe. But this jovial indifference, lounging around some Moulin Rouge nightmare while the universe stood on the brink – it was disgusting. And to respond *by inviting him* – ridiculous. Besides, this space-time bubble couldn't possibly be stable.

He paced the corridors. That bloody song was inescapable. Just as soon as it ended, it began again, like some broken gramophone.

There was something nauseating about the decor here – the gaudy red fabrics, the tacky gold furnishings, the sickly monotonous ostentation. Eventually, he realised why: it was like an extension of that hideous robe the Master had been wearing when they last met. The day he fell into the Eye. This whole world oozed with his decadence. It was extrapolated from it.

There had to be some weakness in the construction. Some mistake. He strode through a doorway, and found himself in some musty back stage. Sculptures of great golden birds hung suspended on wires. Thick curtains of green and red reached toward a distant ceiling.

A man and a woman sprang apart, looked wide-eyed at the intruder.

'Apologies,' he said. 'I didn't mean to interrupt.'

The man was slightly taller than him, thin, boyishly handsome. He wore a slim black suit, an embroidered golden waistcoat, and dark eyeliner.

The woman was ethereally pale in a powdered wig. She looked just like Marie Antoinette.

The couple seemed flustered and wary. They were barely out of adolescence.

‘I’m simply here to discuss a business proposal with the proprietor,’ he told them, then added, faintly hopeful: ‘I don’t suppose you have any advice?’

‘The Master always gets what he wants.’ The young man’s voice was soft, sensitive.

He realised he’d seen him before: he was the singer, the one from the stage. ‘Hang on.’ He could still hear the band playing out front. ‘Who’s that singing now?’

‘It’s just a recording,’ said the singer. ‘It plays during our break. The Master doesn’t like the song to stop.’

He felt a surge of vertigo. The song permeated everything here. It animated everyone, underscored every word they said, everything they did.

‘I’m frightfully sorry about your diving suit,’ said the young woman. ‘It wasn’t our choice to make.’ She was one of the Master’s cabaret girls, he realised. And already a better conversationalist than Marie Antoinette. She turned back to the singer, put her hand to his cheek. ‘My dear, we don’t have long. I can try to be free for the break after next. Meet me on the balcony. We shall have a minute, perhaps two.’

The singer looked distant, as if consulting a mental timetable.

‘You mean you aren’t allowed,’ the Doctor asked the couple, ‘to fraternise?’

The singer’s gaze darted to the red curtains. ‘No,’ he said, hushed, ‘he keeps us apart.’

‘We’re staff,’ she said, simply. ‘We serve the patrons. Our time isn’t our own.’

‘And the other performers? Are they happy with this state of affairs?’

The couple glanced at each other, shook their heads.

‘But you outnumber them,’ said the Doctor. ‘And they don’t look terribly agile. I might say you’re overdue a revolution.’

They asked, in chorus, ‘What’s a revolution?’

The Doctor could have laughed. It had been some time. He reached into his pocket and drew out Ohila’s vial.

‘Perhaps we can come to some arrangement.’

The Master stands in the front doorway, smoking a cigar. The night air is cold, revitalising. He hasn’t been out here in years. The bordello is detailed, almost realistic, but he half-assed the streets – they get simpler and blurrier the further

out you go. Perhaps he could try a little harder. Add a shopping mall, or a barracks. Maybe a church, just for kicks.

He looks up. Fireworks explode across the purple sky, sparks trailing down in soft white arcs. He's always wondered where the fireworks come from. He doesn't remember willing them.

The song pulses, muffled and distant, from the depths of the building. He asks himself, as he sometimes does, why he loves it so much. Maybe it's just satisfying, getting to impose your own endless drumbeat for a change.

Is there a different quality to the singer's voice, this time? A harder, more ferocious edge? Or is it his imagination? The obvious answer occurs to him. He laughs and tosses the cigar into the dark.

The thick fibre cable from the Doctor's diving suit trails across the threshold, snaking round a street corner. The girl who tore off the end left it in the lobby. The Master stoops, picks it up, reels it toward him. The broken tube pumps fresh, warm oxygen against his face. Air from N-Space, with a hint of TARDIS grace. He has to admit, it's been a while.

He wonders where the Doctor's got to. He could find out, of course – he could render the walls invisible with a thought, could summon the Doctor before him with a snap of his fingers – but that's no fun, no challenge, and being eluded by something he wants is a rare pleasure.

The Master throws the cable out into the street and slams the old mahogany door.

He swans back into the bordello, taking the scenic route to glad-hand his patrons as he goes. He enjoys the nods and the handshakes, enjoys the manly, powerful ritual of it, even if they are at his beck and call, even if their handsome white faces are only echoes of his own.

He gets to his seat, and then he sees her. His favourite. She walks over without prompting, sits herself across his lap.

'What do you think, darling,' he asks. 'Should I *come out of my cage*?'

She smiles sweetly. He doesn't expect a response – she's not much more than a puppet – but then she holds up a shiny green apple, places it in his hand. He rolls it over, surprised. Almost thoughtful of her.

'Have you ever had a friend,' he asks, stroking her doll-like face, 'who just sort of... drifts away? For a while you do *everything* together, every minute of every day, like you're one person. Then one day, you don't understand them. It's like they're not who they were. And you just think... how did it end up like this?'

‘You should eat, Master,’ she says, casually, touching his chest. ‘You know what they say. An apple a day.’

Funny. He doesn’t remember teaching her that one.

She’s looking at him, intently. Something’s not right.

He places the apple on the end table.

Several things happen at once. A whirl of motion and colour, of shouts and cries. The girl scampers away.

The band rush off the stage – but he didn’t say they could, he didn’t give them a break, it’s *impossible* – and the system kicks in, the song starts to play itself, spiralling faster and louder.

A struggle breaks out by the couches. The girls are armed – blades, or razors, or knives – and they’re slashing at the patrons. The men, sessile and sedentary, have no idea how to react – they’ve never experienced conflict, never known resistance. They collapse, stunned and useless, barely even trying to crawl away, blood gushing down pristine tuxedos.

The other band members hang back, hesitating, but the singer is crazed. He grabs the guitar and swings it at the Master. He bolts from his chair, trips and scrambles across the floor, pain shooting through his ageing human knees. The singer doesn’t pursue him – he just stands there, aghast and exhilarated, unable to believe what he’s done. The showgirls gather round him, breathless and thrilled, their hands and dresses dripping red.

The lobby door creaks open, and a figure steps calmly into the room. Sees the Master on his knees, his head down, his ageing body frail and trembling.

‘Enough. You’ve had your fun. You’re coming back to Gallifrey, one way or another. Destiny is calling.’

The green curtains behind the Master begin to stir, to swirl. Invisible hands yank them apart, revealing wall-wide windows, glass doors open to an empty stone balcony. The city twinkles beneath its dark purple sky, but an orange light glowers at the horizon, swelling fast.

‘Do you know how long I’ve been here, Doctor?’

The Master is laughing. He looks up, and the Doctor sees the eyes of a serpent.

‘You *really* thought,’ says the Master, ‘you *really* imagined, that you could turn my world against me?’

Purple ebbs away as the hot orange glow fills the sky. It swirls and deforms, twisting around a single point. A black dot, like a glaring pupil, rises above the horizon. A fiery corona blazes around it like an iris. It twitches and throbs, a violent absence.

The singularity at the core of the Eye of Harmony.

The girl and the singer hold each other.

Harsh orange light spills across the room.

And the girls begin to move. They scurry backward, like figures in reversed film. The music slows, grinds to a stop, then begins to play in reverse, speeding up, recorded vocals twisting and demonic. Blood unpoools and undrips, slides across the floor, and the patrons slouch back into their seats, staring and perplexed.

The singer, baffled by his own movements, un-swings the guitar, hands it back to his bandmate. They stumble backward together, back to the stage, and resume their positions. The girls step out onto the dancefloor and begin to kick and twirl with perfect, rehearsed coordination. And the Doctor – he resists it, he fights with every atom of his being – the Doctor finds himself beginning to move with them, to dance in time with the beat.

‘Now you’re starting to get it,’ says the Master. The curtains billow shut, plunging the room into moody dark. He dusts himself off, sinks heavily into his chair, grinning, to watch the show. ‘The night is young, Doctor.’

He reaches over to the end table, picks up an apple, and raises it to take a bite.

The Battlements

Jon Arnold

It was the last quiet night in Gallifrey's history.

It wasn't a peaceful kind of quiet. It was the jittery quiet of anticipation, flavoured with sweat and adrenaline. The trouble with a time war is that you never knew when an attack would come, you could never relax. Oh sure, all the Time Sensitives had pinpointed tomorrow as the optimum point, but they'd been wrong before and if they were lucky, they'd live to be wrong again. Everyone was living in limbo, waiting for the first Dalek attack. Everyone knew they were testing and probing the intricately constructed defences, from the moments the first atoms of the planet's core coalesced to the time when it was no more, consumed by the slow, deadly expansion of the planet's twin suns. But for all that ingenuity, for all the arcane tricks and traps the Time Lords had learned over centuries of their casual mastery of time, it simply boiled down to an equation: the sheer weight of numbers the Daleks would throw at them, Daleks and sacrificial lambs of lesser races. The sheer hatred that drove the Daleks overrode any regard for individual self-preservation: they were an implacable force with the sole purpose of destroying the Time Lords.

Maybe we shouldn't have whacked the hornet's nest, reflected the Doctor. Maybe he should have abandoned the mission on Skaro before the Time Lords asked him to meddle. Rassilon alone knew why he didn't – he grinned ruefully at that thought, with the recent resurrection of the legend. But maybe that had shaped his fourth self, maybe that was why he'd been so intolerant of everyone else. That need never to be manipulated by anyone. Or maybe he'd just been petulant all along. Regeneration made you forget who you were – hell, *why* you were – at the best of times, and he'd never had the best of times with regenerating. His own regeneration crisis had even made him think he was half-human – come to think of it, he still wasn't quite sure whether he was or not. He kept meaning to check, but he wasn't really sure he wanted to know the answer.

He shook himself out of his reverie. While he'd been distracted, he'd walked much further than he thought. He'd reached the viewing gallery in the upper reaches of the Capitol, far from the buzz and underlying panic. The quietest place to be right now, the most dangerous place to be if the bombs started dropping. Still, he wanted to see the suns set, to remember Gallifrey in its stark beauty just in case. The golden skies shading into black. There was a metaphor

there. All that power over time, and you still couldn't stop night falling.

He hadn't expected to find anyone else here, but there was another man sat in the gallery, contemplating the landscape over a flask of what the Doctor supposed must be tea. A man around his age, of medium height and, not unusually for a Time Lord, with a slightly haughty bearing. The man looked round at the sound of the Doctor's footsteps and nodded politely at him as he approached.

'Mind if I join you?'

'But of course, Doctor. Be my guest,' he replied in a cultured accent.

The Doctor nodded back in gratitude. That's the trouble with being a war hero, everyone knows your name. Have to size up whether he's a fan, or one of those who blames you for the whole thing. There's a reason they didn't send that type of binary mind to Skaro way back when. Those types went in with an axe where you needed a scalpel.

'A beautiful night, isn't it?'

'It is,' replied the Doctor. 'Would've been hell if it had just chucked it down.'

The other man chuckled. 'Merely beautiful in a different way. Chaos rather than calm.'

'True. Which is why it's all desert out there of course. Some High Councillor gets in a mood and... well, there's a bespoke weather system retro engineered and it's just sun, sun, sun. And it all stagnates... much like the rest of this place really.'

'Why Doctor, you almost sound as if you're going to welcome the upcoming... change.' The man had delayed his last word to choose it with absolute precision.

'No, I tried shaking the place up once. I forget the details, but it didn't go well.'

'Ah, haven't we all attempted to shake the place up in our own way?'

The Doctor narrowed his eyes. 'Do I know you?'

'Not the face, no. New body.' The man flexed his fingers and a hint of regeneration energy flickered around them.

'Happy with the new model then?'

'I've had worse. Much worse.'

'Haven't we all? You should see some of my fashion disasters.'

'Oh I remember them all too well. Hard to pick a least favourite.'

Ah. He really should've been quicker. 'It's you isn't it?'

'Well of course it is,' said the Master. 'I was a little concerned that this war

had irretrievably dulled your senses,' he sniffed disdainfully. 'It's certainly aged you. And your dress sense certainly hasn't improved since San Francisco either.'

'Sorry to disappoint you. The war's obviously made you a little more coherent though.'

'One can hardly deny that. Floating around as a freeform cloud of molecules is quite the life changing experience. One day, with luck, I may return a similar favour to you.'

'I'd expect nothing less, though you might need to change the décor in your TARDIS a little before I give it a go.'

'Ah, it's been a long time since you've seen it Doctor. I've made vast improvements since you were last in there.'

'Let me guess... a paint job, a few Dalek eyestalks and a collector's set of TCE victims for the mantelpiece?'

'Nothing so needlessly vulgar. I've never had your penchant for needless clutter.'

'Not with objects, nor with people.'

The Master smiled coldly. 'What are people but walking objects, Doctor? Just because they can move, it doesn't mean they need to be kept around once they're of no further use.'

'We always did differ on that one.'

'You're far too generous to our inferiors. What could they teach us?'

'You'd be surprised.'

'You're right, I really would if there was anything.'

'Maybe one day you'll learn.'

The Master cracked another humourless, indulgent grin. 'I always enjoyed your sense of humour, Doctor. But these lesser species have as little to teach us as the merest cobblemouse.' He paused. 'And I've dissected enough of them to know they can teach us nothing.'

Sometimes the Doctor wondered why he still tried to redeem his old friend. 'Perhaps you were just looking in the wrong places.' He considered all he'd known through the years, all they'd been through. 'Or the wrong things.'

'Little things. Unimportant things. Once you know how a heart beats, you need no more.'

'That's always where you fell down, wasn't it? The little things.'

The Master contemplated him quite coolly. 'As I recall, it was the little details that let you down. Or the President would never have discovered who stole that perigosto stick.' His smile returned with a little more warmth. 'Or his wife.'

‘And I would have gotten away with it if it weren’t for those pesky kids.’

‘Oh Doctor, you should have let me deal with them. You would have saved yourself considerable trouble in the long term.’

‘No fear. Not even then.’

‘Well, if you’re ever in need of a few witnesses forgetting... or being forgotten perhaps... the offer stands.’

‘Very kind. I’ll never stop declining it though.’

‘I expected nothing less of you. Whatever your face, that irritating morality of yours never changes.’ The pause that followed was definitely for effect. ‘Perhaps that lack of change means you’re more Time Lord than you thought. Always the same man, whatever the body.’ He glanced back at the Doctor casually. ‘And always a man. Doesn’t it bore you?’

‘You can talk.’

‘Ah, avoiding the question I see.’

‘I’m an expert at avoiding. Time Lords, lasers, Sattorian eye tigers... can’t lay a finger on me. Or a paw.’

‘And Borusa told you about facetiousness as a defence so often.’

‘Yeah. You should have seen the time I saw off a Dalek fleet with The Beano joke book.’

‘A shame that it won’t do Gallifrey much good, or we wouldn’t be here.’

‘I tried you know. A shield of jokes. Trouble is no one here has a sense of humour.’

‘It’s hard to laugh in the face of death, isn’t it?’

‘You should try it some time. Good for the soul.’

The Master laughed. ‘There’s a reason they resurrected me, Doctor. You may lack the imagination to see my talents as necessary, but fortunately the War Council do not.’

‘First time I’ve ever been accused of having less imagination than usual for a Time Lord.’

‘I’m sure there are occasions when even you might be useful.’ His voice hardened. ‘But in a war, you’re redundant. You lack the will to take the necessary actions.’

‘You mean I care too much.’

‘Precisely. The necessary sacrifices aren’t in your nature.’

‘I’ve done pretty well against the Daleks in the past, you know.’

The Master snorted contemptuously. ‘Pah. You lacked the fibre to destroy them when you had the chance. I would not have made such a grievous error.’

‘And damn the consequences.’

The Master gestured at the skies. ‘Doctor, tomorrow that sky will be black with the children of Davros. You have doomed your own kind. It is difficult to imagine many worse consequences.’

‘And yet so many other worlds might be better off.’

The Master laughed, short and mirthless. ‘Specious claptrap. Worlds uniting due to the Dalek threat? Nonsense. When they destroy us they will be the masters of time. There will be no history but Dalek history, from the first molecules colliding to the light of the last sun fading. Your morality is pathetic and inadequate. You should be doing penance for your weakness.’

The Doctor felt needled, reacting to the Master’s vituperative outburst. ‘And what would you have done then?’

‘Destroy the Kaled city utterly. Wipe Davros from the face of history. Skaro deserved nothing but annihilation for harbouring that cosmic plague.’

‘Sentencing millions of innocent living beings to their death.’

‘A mere question of scale, Doctor. Better billions than countless numbers through history.’

‘And you blame me for it.’ The Doctor got up, paced agitatedly to the glass wall and took in the view of the darkening landscape.

‘Well of course I do. Death and destruction on a scale even I have never achieved. And all your responsibility.’

The Doctor whirled round. ‘You’re wrong you know. Even we can’t foresee everything. And the actions of the Daleks are nothing – *nothing* – to do with my decisions. I’m not Davros.’

‘If you say so.’ The Master remained imperturbable in the face of the Doctor’s agitated state.

‘I do. To think otherwise... well, that way lies madness. That way consumes your soul.’

The Master poured himself a measure of tea from the flask and quietly sipped at it.

The Doctor ended what was becoming an uncomfortably long silence. ‘I’m not a warmonger. I can’t go round trying to wipe a species out.’

‘And yet when the Time Lords became scared for the first time in their history, you were an afterthought. They resurrected Rassilon and then they resurrected me. Ruthless people, Doctor. People who have the fibre to do what must be done.’

‘Killers you mean.’

‘If you’re being uncharitable, perhaps so. But we are in a war for our very existence Doctor. Your brand of... compassion is an outdated concept in these times. A soul is a luxury we cannot afford. You can’t argue with a bullet or a bomb.’

‘Depends how sentient they are. Did I ever mention the time I saved Caranthia IV by persuading a web bomb that it would only feel guilty if it went off? Last I heard it had settled down on Moxipus with a neutron gun.’

‘I’m sure it appreciated your sense of humour, Doctor. But again... we’re at war. We don’t need healing. We need every Gallifreyan to fight for their right to exist. You’re redundant.’

‘Never. If we forget ourselves we become no better than the Daleks.’

‘In many places we’re thought of that way. Minyos, Andivia, Karn... we’re as reviled as the Daleks. Ants don’t distinguish between the feet stamping on them.’ Another sip. ‘You may have a place in rebuilding all this Doctor, but you have no place in the war. You’re too soft.’

‘Thank you.’

‘It wasn’t a compliment.’

‘I know, but compliments are very much in the ear of the beholder. Behearer. Whatever.’ The Doctor turned back to look outside, where darkness had fully descended. The stars were out tonight in the clearest of skies, pinpricks of light filling the sky. Wherever, whenever he was in the universe there was a simple joy in losing yourself in the night sky. Something so calm and restful in the contemplation of the geography of galaxies. And sometimes a twinkle in an obscure periphery triggered memories... every one of those lights a message from his past. Or maybe his future.

‘Nevertheless, I fancy even you will be tested in due course,’ said the Master. ‘I do hope you’ll not be found wanting.’

‘I’ll never be like you if that’s what you mean. Never.’

‘You underestimate what circumstances can do to us, Doctor. We must all make terrible choices in war. Even you’re not an immovable object.’ The Master’s foot began to tap out an all too familiar rhythm, the drum-like pattern of the double heartbeat of the Time Lord.

The Doctor didn’t reply. He was lost in thought, his mind accelerating to a million light years a second. ‘That’s not right’ he muttered.

The Master chuckled. ‘We’ll see.’

‘No, not you, them. Out there. Too many stars.’

The sky above Gallifrey was usually relatively sparse. The Master followed

the Doctor's gaze. The stars were breeding, multiplying, linking. The darkness was fading, the black becoming a canopy of harsh white. He sighed. 'Ah well. Perhaps we don't have quite as long as we thought we did. Time to begin preparations.'

He rose from his seat, screwed the top back on his flask and walked toward the labyrinth of corridors and lifts that would carry him to where he needed to be.

'It's been pleasant to have this one last conversation, Doctor. I do hope we meet again.'

Sirens began blaring, warning the population left in the Capitol to take shelter. If there was any.

And then the first bomb fell, laced with nova energy, counteracting the protections the Time Lords had spent centuries devising. It cracked the dome of the Capitol like an eggshell. The gallery floor shook and broke under the Doctor's feet. His world went as white as the sky and he knew no more.

The world was still white when the Doctor awoke, but the white of a hospital rather than of war. He tried to rise but a searing pain shot through his head. Instinctively he put his hand up and found his head bandaged. Oh hell, they'd have got rid of his hair. He'd loved that uncontrollable mess.

A nurse looked round the door. 'Ah good, you're back with us. You were this close to losing another regeneration you know. Took a hell of a crack on the head. You're lucky we had enough artron energy donors to heal you up.'

'Thanks.'

'What in Omega's name were you doing up there anyway? You had to know they could hit us any minute.'

'Enjoying the peace I guess.'

'Not much chance of that now. We've fought them off for the moment, but they'll be back. Like termites, you can't win you can only hold them back.'

'Well quite.'

'Wiped that lot out though, all of them. Hell of a sight.'

The Doctor was silent. He couldn't mourn millions of Daleks, but he could mourn the decaying soul of Gallifrey.

'They'll want you back out there soon you know. Every Time Lord on deck for this.'

'I'm... not sure what I can do. I feel like I've already lost.'

‘You’ll do something clever, as usual. Like the Master did last night.’

‘I dread to think.’

‘Temporal minefield. Hell of a thing. Hundreds of quick jumps, so he was in every one of their ships at once.’

‘What? But that’s...’

‘Yeah, that was the point. Weakened the fabric of the continuum and sucked them into the vortex. One millisecond they were there, the next... just the stars. He’s a hero now. Order of Rassilon they reckon, minimum.’

Maybe the Master was right, reflected the Doctor. Maybe he wasn’t the man Gallifrey needed right now. Maybe he was a Time Lord out of time. Maybe... maybe there wasn’t anything worth saving.

No. He couldn’t think like that. He had to believe in himself. One man could make some kind of difference, even a small one. The Master couldn’t be right. He couldn’t be.

The War seemed like it had gone on forever. In some sense it had: there had only ever been the War, there would only ever be the War. That’s what happens when conflict spreads forward, backward, sideways and in directions unimaginable to creatures who see in less than twelve dimensions. In a purely linear way, the Doctor supposed it had been going on for centuries. Still, his old friend’s words often nagged at the back of his mind. And every time he took them as a strength: to play the healer, to be an avatar of compassion in the midst of horror. It might be like trying to repel a hurricane by blowing into it, but still he tried. All the atrocities he witnessed – the Kovalkian Massacre of the Neverborn, the Annihilation of the Potentials, the Darkness of Noom amongst so many others – chipped away at his resolve, but he held firm. Even in wartime, this incarnation grew old in a way few of his others ever had, clocking up the centuries. He grew tired, but still he tried to help.

And then his life ended, and he was faced with a choice, the dilemma of who he would be next. The words of Ohila stung, admonishing him for the role he hadn’t played. And his mind drifted back to the conversation with his old friend. About the hard choices of war. Had he been avoiding them? Was that all he’d done in this body? Did the universe need something more than a healer now? His thoughts raced, so little time to decide...

Ohila demanded a decision. Who would he be next?

And he made his choice. Warrior. He drank deeply of the draft and died. The new man who walked away declared himself to be the Doctor no more, now a warrior born.

And perhaps somewhere far away in space and time, in the depths of the war, the Master smiled.

ReGenesis of the Daleks

Iain McLaughlin

It was a battlefield.

The ground was churned, scarred, ravaged. Nothing grew there, nothing lived. The twisted, rusting wrecks of innumerable war-machines littered the landscape. There were strands of tangled wire, collapsed dugouts, caved-in trenches. The perpetual twilight was made darker by fog. Thick, dank and evil, it swirled close to the muddy ground, hiding at least some of the horrors from view.

Something stirred in the mud. A goggled, helmeted head peered over a ridge, surveyed the shattered landscape.

The fog swirled and a man emerged from the dark. He looked about, intelligent eyes casting around from under a mop of curly dark hair and a floppy hat. He was unusually tall and wore an extraordinarily long scarf.

The helmeted head followed him curiously, and then the goggled soldier raised a rifle, training it on this stranger. He carefully aimed at the man's head...

A trigger was squeezed.

A man died.

The man with the scarf moved on towards another figure dressed in an absurd, almost jester-like outfit. Neither heard the soldier's rifle slide abandoned down the far side of the rise.

Nobody would ever see the goggled soldier again. His corpse had been shrunk, compressed to a mere few inches long. For a moment it lay in the mud like an abandoned child's toy, then it slid down the slope, slipping into a deep puddle when it would be lost forever in the mud.

Behind the rise stood a man of average size, though his height was the only average thing about him. With his neatly trimmed goatee beard he had a rather Satanic look and his dark eyes burned with a ruthless intelligence. His voice was cultured and intelligent. 'Oh, Doctor,' he said to himself smoothly, sounding almost disappointed, 'your regeneration has made you careless. I do hope you're still up to the challenge.'

The Master moved a little closer to overhear the Doctor's conversation with what could only be a Time Lord. No-one else in the cosmos had the terrible fashion sense of the Time Lords.

'What's going on?' the Doctor was demanding. 'Don't you realise how dangerous it is to intercept a transmat beam?'

The Time Lord gave a condescending smile which the Master knew would annoy the Doctor almost as much as it irritated him.

‘Oh come, Doctor, not with our techniques. We Time Lords transcended such simple mechanical devices when the universe was less than half its present size.’

‘Look, whatever I’ve done for you in the past, I’ve more than made up for. I will not tolerate this continual interference in my life.’

So, this Doctor had some fight in him. That was more promising.

The Master watched the conversation unfold, silently urging them to get on with it. Typical Time Lords, he thought to himself. Their longevity had robbed them of any understanding of urgency.

‘Daleks!’ the Time Lord said.

That certainly got the Doctor’s attention.

‘Daleks? Tell me more.’

The Master sighed. An explanation from a Time Lord might take an eon. It was perfectly simple. The Time Lords wanted the Doctor to avert or affect the development of the Daleks because the Future Spinners in the Quorum of the Matrix had seen a future in which the Daleks conquered the entire universe.

It was a projection which the Master had also seen. Well, *stolen* would be more accurate than just *seen*.

The Doctor had agreed, to the Time Lord’s smug delight.

‘You’re here,’ he told the Doctor. ‘This is Skaro.’

The Master’s eyebrows rose in disappointment. Wasn’t that a bit obvious? There weren’t too many other planets in the galaxy as battle scarred as Skaro. The Master fought to control his impatience. Eventually the Time Lord handed a Time Ring to the Doctor. A ridiculous choice by a ridiculous people, the Master sneered. The Time Lord disappeared and the Doctor quickly met with two humans, one female and one male. He was rather disappointed the female wasn’t Jo Grant. He had always rather enjoyed tormenting her. There were times he had come close to causing her death but she had still shown signs of compassion to him when he had been incarcerated. It was one of those traits which made humans such a fascinating – and occasionally disappointing – species to study. It seemed that the Doctor’s new pets were named Sarah and Harry.

Any further thoughts on the Doctor’s companions were pushed from the Master’s mind by a high-pitched whistling sound. Another artillery barrage. He ducked low and waited until it had passed before following the Doctor’s party, keeping his distance as they crossed the battlefield, almost killing themselves in a minefield, as they moved towards an enormous domed structure. So far, they

were following the projection the Master had stolen from the Future Spinners. He had been slightly perturbed to find himself concerned for the Doctor's safety in the minefield, but at least he knew it would be a temporary situation. As soon as they were finished on Skaro he would have no further use for the Doctor.

The battlefield was littered with trenches. Some were new, others were ancient. The Doctor and his companions had found one in better condition than most. Dead bodies were propped against the sandbagged sides of the trench except for one end which led to the reinforced door of an ugly but solid concrete building. Another barrage sent the Doctor and his friends running to tear gas masks from the faces of the dead. The Master simply pulled a mask from his pocket and slipped it over his face. He watched from a distance as the Doctor's party came under attack from a small group of soldiers. Would he have to intervene again? He needed the Doctor alive for now. Couldn't the fool ever stay out of trouble?

The barrage of machine-gun fire saved the Master from the need to make a decision. A unit of Kaled soldiers spilled from the heavy door and gunned down the men who had attacked the Doctor and his friends. A moment later, the Doctor and his male companion were being dragged inside the little concrete bunker. The Future Spinners hadn't mentioned the female dying, but she lay unmoving among the dead. That would cause the Doctor some considerable distress. The Master chuckled to himself at the thought.

The Doctor would be taken to the bunker for interrogation and hopefully some torture. That meant the Master also had to get inside. He pulled his heavy coat a little more tightly around his shoulders and looked at the little scanner in his hand. He couldn't simply follow the Doctor into this outpost. He would have to gain access at the next entrance and that was more than a mile away across this shattered terrain. He would have to move carefully to avoid both sides of this absurd conflict.

After fifteen minutes, the Master knew that he was being followed. His pursuer was being careful, never getting close enough to be spotted, always staying out of view, but the sounds of movement were clear. They were careful and slow but to someone who knew what they were listening for, they were obvious.

And the Master had been pursued many times.

Where was his pursuer and why hadn't they attacked?

The sounds were from above him to the left. Yes, a small fall of loose rocks as they moved again.

If it was one of the shambling mutants, they would have attacked without thought. Likewise, had it been a Thal, the attack would already have come. His clothing was undeniably Kaled rather than Thal. So, that meant it was a Kaled who was following him, probably wondering if he was a spy of some sort, or just wondering what on Skaro he was doing out in the open like this.

He passed by a broken building and disappeared around the side of it. As soon as he knew he was out of sight, the Master scrambled through the remains of a window, climbing over the dead body of a soldier propped there to make the building look manned, and scooped up a small blaster from the soldier's holster.

He waited.

Waited.

Waited.

This one was cautious, taking their time. Taking no chances.

They were coming though. He heard the footsteps on the wet ground. A small figure passed by the window.

'Please stand still.' The Kaled blaster was pressed into the back of the small figure's head. 'I'm sure neither of us would have our days improved if I had to kill you.'

'Pretty sure it would ruin mine more than yours,' a young female voice replied.

The Master studied the girl. She was short, barely an adult, but there was spirit in her. She was wearing a Kaled uniform, which meant she could be useful. Two uniformed Kaleds would be less conspicuous than a solitary figure. Besides, if the Doctor persisted in having pets follow him, it might be amusing to do the same.

He slipped the weapon into a pocket. 'If you had been a Thal you would be dead now.'

The girl turned to face him. She had neck-length dark hair, surrounding an elfin face which humans would probably have found pretty. 'If I'd been a Thal you'd have been dead a long time ago.'

She definitely had spirit. That was promising. She might turn out to be useful. 'What is your name?'

'Ossian,' the girl answered. 'Captain in the advance guard.'

The Master waved a finger forward and met her at a shattered doorway. He showed her the high-ranking uniform he had stolen from a recently shrunk officer. 'As of now, you are *my* guard, is that understood?'

Ossian's intelligent brown eyes flicked to the stolen uniform's rank insignia and then nodded. 'Yes, sir.'

That was more like it. A bit of respect from the locals. 'What I am doing on this mission is far above your security clearance. If you share your knowledge of this mission with anyone you will be executed. Is that clear?'

There was no surprise in the girl's face. Clearly threats of that sort were commonplace in the Kaled army. 'I understand, sir.'

The Master allowed Ossian to lead the way to the next outpost. It made sense for her to face any danger first.

She was wary of his questions and gave guarded answers. She was evidently more afraid of her own superiors than of the Thals. That was fine. That would keep her jumping to obey his orders. Her evasiveness had piqued his curiosity, though. When asked about her mission, she had given clever but empty replies, answering without giving a real answer. That was an unknown quantity the Master did not like. As they dropped into the trench leading to the shielded door, he caught Ossian's arm.

'I have asked you several times about your mission and you have used a considerable number of words to tell me precisely nothing. Now, before we go inside, perhaps you will obey my instructions and tell me what your mission is.' His eyes held hers. He felt her will resisting his pressure. She was strong. He was stronger. 'You will tell me.' She was weakening. One more push. 'Something to do with Davros?'

He saw her face relax. She thought he knew why she was there already. 'Yes, sir.'

'Tell me,' he said persuasively.

And she did. 'Officially I have been posted to the Bunker to assist the Scientific Elite but the truth is that a group of scientists in the Bunker are unsure about the direction their work is taking and they contacted a friendly arm of the military. I am to see if their fears were founded and feed information back to my superiors.'

'That is a fortunate coincidence,' the Master oozed, 'and rather an irritating one. It seems that our superiors have sent us both on similar missions and omitted to inform either of us about the other. Perhaps they sent two agents in case one was caught.'

'Maybe they sent three,' Ossian muttered. 'That way we don't need to be here.'

The Master smiled wryly. 'I'm afraid our missions are rather urgent, my dear.

Unfortunately we do not have the luxury of picking which parts of them we will obey.’ He almost chuckled to himself. He could imagine the Doctor – the previous Doctor – spouting something as pompous as that. He indicated the heavy door. ‘Now, shall we?’

To the Master’s surprise, the outpost was in chaos as he and Ossian were admitted.

‘Two male prisoners have escaped, sir,’ a panicking soldier trilled. ‘Nyder himself has ordered their recapture.’

‘Has he indeed?’ the Master mused. ‘Nyder himself.’ So, this Nyder was someone to be reckoned with and probably avoided. Or just killed if he got in the way. ‘Well, we will be on our way into the Bunker and let you continue going about your duty.’

The journey to the Bunker on a small transporter vehicle was uncomfortable but thankfully brief. They merged quickly into the hustle of military and scientific staff, slowly making their way to the quieter lower levels of the complex. They found an abandoned little room equipped with computer terminals and screens. The Master settled into a chair.

‘So,’ Ossian asked, ‘is this our plan? To hide down here?’

The Master was already operating the controls. They were childishly simple. ‘No, my plan is to observe what is happening in the Bunker from here, preferably without being interrupted by Davros or any of his drudges who work here.’

Ossian shook her head in surprise. ‘I’ve never heard anyone speak of Davros with such little respect.’

The Master glanced up. ‘Isn’t that what we’re here to do? Decide if he merits the respect he’s given? How can we give an honest appraisal of that if we have arrived having already decided he deserves the hero worship he craves?’

‘That’s a fair point, I suppose,’ Ossian conceded.

‘You’ll find I make those rather a lot,’ the Master sniffed. ‘Now, let us see...’ He operated a few controls, rotating through a series of observation cameras. Eventually he caught sight of one which captured his interest. On the flickering screen, the Doctor and his male companion were being shoved into seats in front of a scientist. ‘Ah, they’ve caught him. Splendid. We’re back on track.’

Ossian peered forward for a better look at the prisoners. ‘Caught who?’

‘Another player in our little game,’ the Master answered, ‘and for once he’s exactly where I need him to be.’

Ossian squinted at the flickering image of a curly-haired man. ‘Does he work with you?’

‘In this instance he works *for* me,’ the Master answered, clearly relishing the thought. ‘And you have no idea how much that fact would annoy him.’ He turned a small dial. ‘Now let’s hear what he’s saying.’

Before the new Doctor’s voice could come through, an alarm clanged on the speakers. ‘Davros wishes all members of the elite scientific corps to assemble in the main laboratory immediately.’

‘Does he now?’ the Master murmured. ‘I wonder why?’

They watched the shrivelled figure in the powered chair glide into view on screen. The Master recognised the chair as something unnervingly familiar. The broken, mechanised voice was equally recognisable. The mid-point between Kaled and Dalek. So this was Davros.

The Master said nothing but watched and listened as the Kaled scientist talked of his progress. Even through the mechanical distortion his ego was unmistakable. A door slid open and a familiar domed shaped glided into view.

‘A Dalek,’ the Master said, noting the lack of a weapon arm. ‘Very primitive but undeniably a Dalek.’

‘He just called it a Mark 3 Travel Machine,’ Ossian countered.

‘Did he indeed?’ The Master fell silent again, watching the Dalek be put through rudimentary tasks, obeying Davros’ voice controls. He leaned forward, his interest far more piqued as the Dalek was fitted with a gun and turned over to autonomous control. It circled the room, scanning everyone present before halting in front of the Doctor and his companion.

‘Aliens! I must exterminate! Exterminate!’

The Master clenched involuntarily at the edge of the desk. The idiot couldn’t be killed here. Not yet.

The Kaled scientist who had been interrogating the prisoners leaped forward and operated a control on Davros’ chair. ‘No!’

The Dalek fell dark and silent.

‘That scientist just saved your man’s life,’ Ossian said softly, watching Davros berate the Kaled scientist for insubordination. ‘I wouldn’t want to be him when he has to pay for that.’

‘Indeed not,’ the Master agreed. ‘Then again, I doubt that I would have enjoyed being in that room at all either.’

‘That Dalek thing was going to kill those men.’

The Master nodded. ‘And very efficiently too.’

Ossian turned a suspicious gaze towards the Master. ‘How did you know what it was called before Davros named it?’

The Master smiled charmingly. ‘That my dear, is a very long story and why I am here.’

Ossian took a deep breath before speaking. ‘And we’re all going to wind up like one of those Dalek machines?’

‘I most certainly hope not,’ the Master answered. ‘I don’t think it would suit me, do you?’

The girl was not to be distracted. ‘So, what are we going to do?’

The Master wafted a hand at the screen. ‘Those two strangely dressed... well, those two need to escape back to the Kaled dome.’ He paused for a moment and then pointed at one of the scientists. ‘But first I need for you to arrange for me to meet Kavell there.’

The meeting with Kavell took place several hours later in another abandoned room in a remote corridor. The Master had no idea how Ossian had persuaded Kavell to come but the Kaled scientist was clearly petrified and waiting to be set upon by guards – or worse – at any moment.

‘Who are you? Why am I here?’

The Master donned his most charming façade. His smile was beatific and his voice soothing. ‘Good. I like a man who gets straight to the point.’ He waved Ossian towards the door. ‘Would you ensure that we are not disturbed, my dear?’

The girl duly obeyed and stood guard at the door. ‘Of course.’

‘You didn’t answer my questions,’ Kavell said. He sounded on edge, ready to run.

The Master waved the man towards a chair and took another chair for himself. ‘But I shall. Please sit.’

‘I would rather stand,’ Kavell said stiffly.

The Master’s eyes bored into the Kaled’s and he felt the scientist’s resistance fading. ‘And I insist that you sit. I insist upon it.’

Kavell slowly sank into the chair. ‘If you insist.’

Excellent. The man’s mind was malleable. That would be useful. ‘As you are

aware – and please don't deny it – there are serious concerns over the direction of the work being undertaken by Davros with his travel machine, the Dalek.'

'I know nothing of this,' Kavell snapped automatically.

'Of course you don't. Of course not,' the Master kept his voice smooth. 'However, it is a fact that there is serious concern in the Dome about the direction of the work here, about the lack of morality being instilled into the Dalek.' He paused and looked deep into Kavell's eyes. 'Ah, now I see that has struck a nerve with you. I will say no more, other than should you and any of your colleagues have concerns, well, you will have support from the highest levels within the Dome.'

Kavell forced himself to his feet. 'I did not have this conversation, and you should forget it as well.'

'Of course.' The Master stood and gave a slight nod of the head. 'I will detain you no longer.'

Kavell hurried from the room.

'He's going straight to Nyder,' Ossian said.

'You think so?' The Master's eyebrows rose. 'Did you see the way he walked out? His shoulders were squarer. A weight had been lifted from him. He knows he is not alone any longer.' He plucked a small disc from his pocket and held it out to her. 'Now, I would like you to go and place this at a very particular spot within the bunker. I'll tell you where.'

'What is it?'

So this was what it was like having one of the drudges as a companion. Non-stop inane questions. 'The Doctor and his friend will be escaping rather soon. Don't ask how I know. I don't have the time or the inclination to explain. They will be leaving by way of the current residence of some of Davros' abandoned experiments.' He tapped the disc. 'This will disorient most of the creatures in there. It will probably just annoy a few as well, but it should make their passage easier.'

Ossian took the disc uncertainly. 'Wouldn't it be quicker if you put it in place?' she asked hopefully. 'You know where it should go.'

'Undoubtedly,' he nodded cheerfully. 'My dear Ossian, anyone caught setting that device in place would undoubtedly be shot. I certainly don't intend to suffer that fate myself.'

The girl's face scrunched sourly. 'Thanks a lot. It's nice to know you care.'

'Oh, I care very much,' the Master countered. 'I care that the Doctor does what I need him to do.'

‘Are you two friends?’

Well, that was a question, wasn’t it? ‘Once perhaps. Now... now we see things very differently, but in this instance we are very much on the same side.’ A humourless laugh escaped from him. ‘Something neither of us would be particularly comfortable about.’

Once alone, the Master pulled a small computer from his pocket and set it on the desk. He operated a small control and a dull green light appeared on the surface. The computer hummed contentedly as it scanned the area. The Master relaxed into his chair and waited. He let his body drift and closed down the surface level of his brain, his open eyes taking in the actions on all of the flickering screens. He scarcely showed any interest when Ossian returned and barely acknowledged her report. He ignored the food she had brought back. While the girl dozed off, he continued to observe, watching events unfold as he knew they would. The attack on the supposedly unbreachable Kaled dome and its subsequent destruction raised no emotion in him at all. He didn’t disturb Ossian to tell her what had happened, and when she did wake up he was forced to hypnotise her into silence. She had a strong mind which took some considerable persuasion to keep calm. He was tempted to simply kill her but he was likely to have use for her later. He watched Davros despatch his Daleks to the Thal city to wipe out the enemy he had just aided. Some would survive. Their descendants had irritated the Master more than once in the future. Should he do something now to stop that happening?

No, no more interfering with time, at least not here on Skaro. That hadn’t worked out well for him and he had learned a lesson from that. This could not be his doing.

Exactly on time, the Doctor and his companions returned and were captured. Even when he was being aided the fool couldn’t avoid being caught. The Master felt an odd sense of relief that the female had survived the attack out in the trenches. He had always been strangely fond of Miss Grant. He would have been disappointed if her replacement had been killed quite so easily.

Davros’s torture of the Doctor’s companions was rather entertaining, though this new Doctor buckled every bit as fast as his previous incarnation would have. The grumpy Doctor he had first known on Gallifrey would have held out for much longer. That Doctor wouldn’t have indulged in that ridiculous discussion

on morality with Davros either. There was no doubt that the Kaled scientist was completely insane but trying to argue logically with a maniac hardly spoke well of this Doctor. There was a moment of potential when the Doctor surprised him by turning off Davros's life support. That was more like it. There was a brief moment of optimism that this Doctor was ruthless enough to kill the Kaled, but his infernal morality got in the way and a moment later he lay unconscious on the ground, clubbed down by Nyder. It was a terrible shame that Nyder was so dedicated to Davros. He could have been useful. The amoral were always so malleable.

There was another lengthy wait as the Doctor was taken away to be thrown into a cell with his companions, though the uprising of the Kaled scientists soon had the Doctor free.

On one monitor, the Doctor and his companions were out in a corridor. It was almost time... *yes, there it was*. A spiralling glow was beginning to form in the corner of a corridor on the second lowest level, the one just above them.

'What is that?' The strange phenomenon has roused Ossian from the haze the Master had been keeping her in. Thankfully, the block on her emotions was still holding.

The Master closed down his computer and slipped it back into his pocket. 'That, my dear, is a temporal portal.'

Her brow furrowed. 'A what?'

'Think of it as a tunnel through time and space,' the Master explained, his eyes flicking from screen to screen, taking stock of everyone's positions as the pieces moved into place for the reason he had come back to Skaro.

Ossian shook her head. 'That's impossible.'

The Master chuckled. 'Oh, you think so? Then how would you explain this?'

A black shape appeared in the heart of the mass of energy on screen, quickly becoming recognisable as a humanoid. A moment later, the familiar figure of the Master stepped out of the energy portal.

Ossian's mouth gaped open. 'It's impossible. How can you be there and here as well?'

The Master sighed. Didn't the drudges ever listen? 'I did mention that was a portal through time?'

'But that is not possible,' she repeated.

'And yet there I am,' the Master beamed. 'Rather handsome, don't you think?'

A second shadow formed and a familiar domed shape glided from the energy portal.

Ossian's voice had turned cold. 'Why are you with a Dalek?'

The Master ignored his companion's changed in tone. 'Technically the Dalek is with me. It is my protection. There *is* a war on, you know.'

The girl's eyes narrowed and she peered at the screen more closely. 'It looks different. And I don't just mean its colour.'

She was correct. The bronze Dalek on the screen had a more armoured look than those Davros had just created. It looked bulkier, more solid, more dangerous. 'It is,' the Master agreed. 'It's more advanced than those already here by several millennia. The conversation is still somewhat lacking, though.'

'What's happening?'

The Master sighed. 'Well, I'm afraid my other self there,' he nodded towards himself on the screen, 'is on his way to the Dalek Incubator Room. You see, the Doctor – the curly haired buffoon – has been sent back to change their evolution into something less aggressive. That version of me is also here to alter their evolution but in the misguided belief that he can turn the Daleks into something that can be controlled.'

Ossian's expression became more suspicious. 'Controlled by who?'

The question surprised the Master. Wasn't the answer obvious? 'Well, me, of course.'

Ossian struggled to make sense of the information being thrown at her. 'Are you saying you're from the future?'

The Master nodded nonchalantly. 'Something like that?'

'A leader from the future?' Ossian pressed.

That brought a chuckle from the Master. *Leader? Ruler? Galactic dictator? What was the difference?* 'That is definitely the plan, yes.'

Ossian was not finished with her questions. 'But when you change these Daleks...'

The Master sighed. 'Well, even the best laid plans go astray.' He changed the subject. How did the Doctor ever get anything done when he had to answer these interminable questions? 'Now, my slightly younger self needs to be stopped, but not harmed. I will undoubtedly survive a minor ripple in my timeline but even I would struggle to recover from death. And that's a long story we needn't go into.'

Ossian accepted the change in his tone. 'So what do we have to do?'

'Stop me from killing the Doctor so he can do whatever it is he came here to do.'

Ossian stared at the Master in shock. 'You – that you – came here to kill that

man?’

The Master raised his hands in a placating gesture. ‘Once you’ve met him you will understand the urge to kill him.’

‘And the Dalek?’

‘Yes, I’m afraid we have to deal with that at well.’

‘How?’ Ossian asked.

A sly, rather unpleasant smile crept onto the Master’s features. ‘Oh, I have a little something in mind.’

One level up, the younger version of the Master moved confidently through the empty corridors with his Dalek escort following a metre behind him. The timing of this incursion had been carefully planned so that the Bunker’s scientists would be gathered in the main laboratory to hear Davros’ plea for their support, and the early Daleks would be gathered near the laboratory, ready to wipe out those scientists.

The small figure of Ossian appeared ahead, turning the corner at the end of the corridor. ‘There you are,’ she said to the Master. ‘We’ve been waiting for you.’

The Master stopped and the Dalek escort held position a few feet behind him. Both scrutinised Ossian carefully. ‘I beg your pardon?’

Ossian’s nose wrinkled playfully. ‘I’ve got to say, that beard really does nothing for you. Puts years on you.’

‘Do we know each other?’ the Master demanded.

Ossian offered a cheeky smile. ‘That would be telling. And if you want me to tell you, you’ll have to catch me... Master.’

The Master’s stance stiffened. ‘How do you know...’

‘Wouldn’t you like to know?’ Ossian answered glibly.

The Master’s eyes bored into Ossian’s. Even from this distance he could be compelling. ‘And you will tell me. I am the Master and you will...’

Ossian spun quickly. ‘Run,’ she interrupted, and she set off out of sight, sprinting along the corridor.

The Master waved the Dalek past him. ‘Take her alive... at least still alive enough to be able to talk.’

The Dalek set off in pursuit, its movements smoother – and considerably faster – than those of the Daleks a few levels above. ‘Halt. Halt.’

The powerful, bronze Dalek’s speed startled Ossian and she increased her

speed. 'Not a chance.'

The Dalek followed remorselessly. 'Halt. You will obey. You will obey.'

Ossian didn't look back. She didn't dare look to see if the Dalek was closer. 'I wouldn't bet on it.'

'You will...' The Dalek's voice deteriorated into a screech of agony. The Master – Ossian's version of the Master - emerged from a doorway behind the Dalek, holding a small tubular device with a bulbous end. He operated the device and the Dalek screamed louder. The Master operated his device again and the end of the device glowed. A metal screech came from the Dalek and it took Ossian a moment to realise that it was not the creature inside making the terrible noise. The metal or whatever the thing was made of was rippling, buckling, reshaping... and it was shrinking.

The Master's eyebrows lifted in detached interest. 'The tissue must be wired to the Dalek shell.' He picked up the miniature Dalek and tossed it to Ossian. 'We must get these in the shops for Christmas.'

She turned the miniaturised Dalek over in her hands. 'For what?'

Her version of the Master was gone. The younger version, however, was striding towards her, and this time he was holding that stubby bulbous weapon. 'You... what have you done with my Dalek?'

Ossian looked guiltily at the miniature Dalek in her hand. She took a nonchalant half-step towards a nearby door. 'This? Oh, nothing. Well, maybe a little...'

The younger Master had noticed her easing towards the door. 'If you move again I will kill you. You will find that I am considerably less easy to deal with than a...' His voice was cut short and he crumpled to the floor.

Ossian's version of the Master stood over his younger self, an alien-looking energy pistol in his hand. 'I hated interrupting myself but we are short of time.'

Ossian smiled tightly. 'I'm not complaining.'

The Master indicated his fallen past self. 'Take him back to the time portal and push him through.'

'I can't carry him,' Ossian protested.

The Master looked at her with disdain. Did they all whine this much? 'Then drag him.'

'You're not going to help?'

The Master shook his head firmly. 'That wouldn't be wise. There are... *difficulties* when one meets oneself at varying points in the timestream. I am not eager to test the limits of Blinovitch. Besides, I have somewhere else to be.'

‘Fine, so I’ll just drag him on my own, shall I?’ Ossian muttered.
The Master had already gone.
Ossian began dragging the unconscious younger Master away.

There was a change in the atmosphere within the Bunker. Even the air tasted different. The Kaled scientists would have been exterminated by now and the Daleks would be moving towards autonomy. This wasn’t the Kaled bunker anymore. It belonged to the Daleks. The Doctor would be hurrying towards the Incubator Room, ready to blow it up. There would be no need for the Master to still be here if the Doctor hadn’t had that ridiculous bout of moralising while staring at a pair of wires. All that was needed was for the Doctor to complete his task, and then there would be that delicious moment of finally ending this game between them. The Master daren’t be the one to reset history to its true path. Time would not appreciate one person playing fast and loose with the same incident twice. But once the Doctor had destroyed the Incubator Room... well, that would be a moment the Master would savour. It was a pity that his old enemy had changed faces. The velvet-clad dandy had tormented him for too long.

Two more corners and he would be there.

Two more corners and he could finally be rid of the meddling fool.

He felt the Tissue Compression Eliminator in his hand.

He reached the first corner, an intersection of two corridors crossing at right angles.

Immediately he sensed the danger. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end.

‘Halt! You will be exterminated!’

The Dalek was turning into the farthest end of the corridor, perhaps ten metres away.

The Master ran. His plans had to change. There was no time now for him to savour killing this new curly haired Doctor. But he could make sure the Dalek did it for him. He ran towards the Incubator Room. He only needed to dip into a room for a moment to transmat himself back to his TARDIS. He just had to make sure the Dalek would find the Doctor. He knew that he could simply go, and let the Doctor complete his task but that rage would not let him; the hatred for the Doctor had to be satisfied.

The Doctor had to die.

He was almost there.

Almost.

‘You will be exterminated!’

The blast from the Dalek’s gun hit the wall to his side, but enough of the weapon’s energy was deflected to knock the Master off his feet. He struggled to force himself upright but his legs were like lead. They were sluggish and threatened to betray him at any second. He had made a mistake by trying to ensure the Dalek caught the Doctor. The Dalek fired again, barely missing him. He reached a corner and turned.

Two hands caught him and pulled him through a doorway. The door closed quickly.

‘Hush.’ It was Ossian’s voice, close to his ear.

The Dalek’s voice came closer and glided past the door outside. They heard its voice screech as it moved away. A moment later its blaster fired.

‘Sounds like it found your friend,’ Ossian said.

Life was returning to the Master’s legs. ‘How did you get here so quickly?’

‘I ran,’ Ossian answered. ‘So did you – the other you. He came to as I was dragging him along and he ran right into that portal thing.’

The Dalek’s blaster sounded again from along the corridor, muffled slightly by a corner.

‘At least I’m safe,’ the Master said with some relief. But the job wasn’t done yet. Had the Doctor let him down again? Had the Dalek stopped him from...

An explosion shook the little room.

The Master relaxed. ‘The Incubator Room has been destroyed,’ he smiled. ‘With luck the Doctor is dead as well.’ He fished a small box from his pocket. ‘And now I must be going. I would suggest that you leave as well, but there are likely to be rather a lot of angry Daleks outside.’ He gave a charming smile. ‘Besides, I believe that the entrance is about to be brought down in a huge explosion which will trap the Daleks in here for, oh, a thousand years or so.’

Ossian’s eyes widened. ‘So what will I do?’

The Master’s mouth quirked in a sort of facial shrug. ‘My dear Ossian, that that is hardly my problem.’ His thumb came down on the control button of the box in his hand.

As his thumb touched the button. Ossian grabbed him and held on tightly. ‘It is now.’

The Master’s last thought as he left Skaro was to wonder how in the universe

the Doctor put up with having companions.

The Genoai Tango

Ellen Montgomery

The Master was not entirely certain she enjoyed this ‘sideways in time’ nonsense.

She kept on running into herself, first off. With the zigzag pattern of her travels across her alternative time streams it was certainly inevitable, yet she kept on running into versions that she’d rather not dwell upon too much. Provincial men and underhanded women—undercover plots and outlandish schemes—people for whom a Time Lord’s mastery over time was a fine-tuned art which all too often garnered little appreciation.

Secondly, she kept stumbling upon her old school mate, Theta Sigma. More often than not, it took a while for the light of recognition to shine darkly in the other Time Lord’s eyes and it was rather annoying. The Theta Sigma of her primary time stream was decidedly better than these other versions – they were merely shadows of the brother she’d come to know over many, many faces. Her brother was never a weakling, which surprised her when she ran into him here, or into her there. She needed to escape these lesser dimensions, to be rid of the imposters pretending to be Theta Sigma, Scourge of the Daleks and Pride of the Academy. Sure, he hadn’t passed with the best marks, but when he took the name of the Doctor, it was done with the utmost irony.

Thirdly, well, everything was simply becoming rather exhausting.

The sensors were acting oddly.

Snapping her book shut, the Master placed the volume down and headed over to her TARDIS’s control panels. She’d long-ago evicted the last person to travel with her, making the Time Lady the only pilot of the six-stationed machine as it floated through the time vortex in her quest to find a way back to her native dimension. Walking along, she heard her heels click, click, click against the floor, the sound still clear over the whining and whinging of the instruments.

The disruption was getting worse.

‘Alright then my girl, let me see what’s been bold enough to try and jam *my* communications,’ she smirked.

She landed the space-time ship with a bit of turbulence, a rarity for her.

Outside sensors picked up that the atmosphere was at least breathable, so she took that as it was, and decided there was little harm in at least investigating her surroundings. She checked herself before going out, taking pleasure in her appearance this go-around: short grey hair and copper-brown skin, with a slim frame that wore a suit well... she was going to have to remember to revisit this face next time she was at a loss for a new one.

The Master stepped out of the TARDIS and took note of the planet she now found herself on. Physically, things seemed normal enough; green sky, blue grass, and trees with red-and-gold leaves. The distant sounds of a raging battle, however, were breaking the tranquillity of the scene – guns, explosions, and blaster fire – which possibly explained the disruption to the sensors. She walked carefully towards the source, eager to observe while still keeping a safe distance. It didn't look like the battle was heading her way, until the tree she was hiding behind was splintered by a bullet.

'Hands up!' a voice commanded. The Master complied, raising her arms to show she was nominally unarmed. A pair of soldiers emerged from the forest with their guns drawn, looking extremely ratty and tired. Everything about them was in need of a wash, from their blue-black skin, caked in tan dust, to their clothes that had been shredded by time and lack of care. The shorter of the two came up to the Master, looking inside her suit jacket with help from the barrel of his rifle.

'Weapons?' the other asked warily.

'No,' the first said. 'She's dressed oddly, and doesn't look like anyone I know. Didn't all the Middle Folk declare neutrality? That would mean that they keep to themselves and not show up near battles...'

'This is the part where you take me in for questioning, *without* touching the suit this time,' the Master said, doing her best to not sound bored. She stifled a grin as she readjusted her jacket and was ordered to come along quietly; this was too easy.

The path they took was a long and winding one, which skirted the battlefield and gave the Master a shot at guessing where they were at. Genoai, she figured, based on the clothing, weapons, and skin pigments of the wounded huddled close to the tree line. If that were the case, then the TARDIS really had thrown her out into the boonies, flinging her to a sleepy little planet away from anything exciting. A wee civil war was happening, and it was enough to bore her to tears.

Eventually, her captors brought her underground into their operations bunker. A couple barked orders from some superior officers and the Master found herself

being pushed into a deep, dank holding cell, already occupied by a hunched figure in the corner. The metal door slammed behind her and that seemed to be that.

‘What are you here for?’ the figure in the corner asked in a deep, burring voice.

‘I was just curious, nothing more.’ The Master stepped closer to the figure and furrowed her brow – this wasn't any Genoa bumpkin... ‘Doctor...?’

The figure stood and moved closer, the light coming from the corridor illuminating his face. Not that she needed it—the psychic signature could only have come from her oldest, most complicated friend, her brother in all but blood. Although his hair matched hers in its grey-brown colour, it was wild and alert; combined with his plaid trousers and many layers of shirts and sweatshirts. It seemed almost as though he had just woken up from a night of equations and restorative meditation.

‘...Missy...?’ he wondered.

‘Missy...? Is that what I’m going by in your point of the time stream?’ the Master laughed. She saw they were nearly the same height, with her being barely taller in her heeled shoes. ‘How *interesting*.’

‘So then... you’re not the Master...?’

‘Not the face you’re thinking of, at least.’ She sized him up; there was a reason as to why they were both there at the same time. ‘I take it you’re here out of curiosity as well?’

‘I caught a distress beacon and wanted to see what was going on – turns out it’s a bit more than a minor distress.’

‘Still answering those for fun? You never change.’ She watched him as he checked the small opening in the door to see if anyone was nearby. He pulled a device from his pocket and it began whirring as it scanned the door. He was still fiddling with sonic technology, yet somehow the Genoa didn’t think him as being armed. She scrutinised her suit in order to appear distracted and made sure there was no errant dust. ‘My TARDIS’s sensors began going ballistic and I decided to peek in to see what the fuss was all about. This doesn’t look like it’ll be a difficult time to get out.’

‘Did you land just outside the battlefield?’

‘Yes...’

‘And does your TARDIS look like a native tree?’

‘No...’

‘Then your TARDIS has likely already been discovered and has been taken to

where mine is located.'

'Which is...?'

'I don't know.'

The Master raised an eyebrow critically. 'What do you mean you don't know?'

'I don't, despite trying to figure it out for a week now.'

She watched as the Doctor's face began to turn an interesting shade of pink. He saw she was staring and went pinker. 'What...?!'

'Are you alright? Your skin looks like it is burning.'

'Is not.'

'Is too.'

'You're lying.'

'You need to be smart and acquire more melanin with your next regeneration if you keep having this issue; not nearly as much risk of burns,' she offered plainly. The Doctor rolled his eyes – same old Theta Sigma. 'You have a plan?'

'Mostly to just demand to talk to someone and get a tour of the place in the meantime, so that I can find where my TARDIS is located. The soldiers here are just competent enough to be a bother if we decide to simply walk out.'

'Which rules out standard Academy procedure.'

She tried to initiate psychic contact and was met with a resistance that she could only describe as both sharp and fuzzy at the same time. 'Ow – let me in so we can talk in private.'

'Can't. Whatever interference that was causing your TARDIS's functions to go haywire is preventing us from utilising our full skillset,' he explained. The Doctor scratched his neck and allowed his arm to limply drop to his side. He seemed to carry the weight of eons on him – *odd*. Her Theta Sigma *never* acted as such. 'So... when are you from? At least we can figure that part out.'

She raised an eyebrow. 'You can't tell?'

'You told me yourself: I'm a rubbish Time Lord,' he shrugged. 'It's easier to just ask.'

'We've already taken on the Jesparti Empire,' she replied. It was his eyebrows' turn to go up—the expressive devils. He was clearly confused.

'The Jesparti are a minor influence within their galactic spheres... nothing that can ever be considered an *empire*. I've checked. There's little to take down, if anything.'

The Master looked at her old friend and frowned. She could tell that this was a very different dimension than the others she had been in—that much was for certain—but her brother's psychic signature... was *she* the one being rubbish

this time around? Impossible – she had graduated top of their class. Other people were the ones with goody-two-shoes alternate-selves in other dimensions... not *their kind*, and even his other incarnations were at least poorly-put together, not like *this*. A Time Lord was a fusion of all their selves, of all possibilities, in some way... it was part of how they functioned. Surely he was able to see that.

‘When was the last time we met, in your reckoning?’ she asked.

‘Spaceport Zanzibar.’ The Doctor saw the confusion on her face and blinked. ‘You know, in the Mevian System... not the Earthen region its founders came from... though we’ve met there too and...’ Her stare did not lighten, causing him to cringe slightly. ‘We haven’t got to that part yet, have we? I knew there was a blank space between Apalapuchia and the Autons in Brixton...’

‘Earth? You are still distracted by that place?’

‘I wouldn’t call it ‘distracted’...’

The Master just opened her mouth to respond, ready to question how far he’d fallen, how far native he’d gone like so many before and after them who were weak once out in the field, but she was interrupted by a loud thump on the other side of the door. The Time Lords both watched as the door slowly swung open, bringing their captors into view.

‘You’re to come before the Senate,’ the smallest of the Genoeae declared. His cohorts walked past him and cuffed their prisoners. ‘The Chancellor wishes to see you both.’

‘What an honour,’ the Master smirked. She and the Doctor were both blindfolded and pushed out of the cell, as though that was going to stop them.

After a short walk, the prisoners were placed on the back of a cart and transported elsewhere. The passageway never went above ground, taking them on a subterranean tour of the compound, for all that it was worth. They were taken off the cart and their eyes uncovered. It was a proper building now, despite still being underground.

‘Come with us,’ a new soldier ordered. As they were guided along the corridors, the Master and the Doctor discovered something interesting; they could make mental contact.

‘*That’s better,*’ she projected into his mind. ‘*Was almost beginning to feel naked.*’

‘*Be careful – we don’t know why the psychic fields aren’t as disrupted here,*’ the Doctor warned.

‘*Oh, you aren’t any fun at all.*’

The further into the building they went, the more curious things became; it was

a veritable labyrinth of twists and turns, making the prisoners wonder how long they still had to go. They kept going, even as a tiny blip appeared in the Master's consciousness: her TARDIS.

'There,' she noted. As they passed another corridor, she knew precisely the route to take in order to retrieve their TARDISEs. Projecting it into the Doctor's mind, she made sure he knew exactly where to go in case they were broken up.

Her message was clear: they were both going to survive.

The pair were finally led through a large, heavy set of double doors, leading into a cavernous room where scores of people had been gathered. Psychic interference absolutely skyrocketed, refilling the Time Lords' brains with fuzz and distraction.

'There is someone in here that shouldn't be,' the Doctor projected to the Master, struggling the entire time. *'Something is off.'*

'It seems fine to me,' she replied. Hmm... it was oddly difficult to psychically communicate. *'The Genoe are merely a sub-psychic species – this sort of interference is common in crowds.'*

'Not this sort... this feels different.' She glanced at him, raising her eyebrows – what was he catching that she wasn't?

'You, intruders,' a voice boomed. The Time Lords finally took note of what they were being led towards: a Genoe sitting in a chair atop a short, though steep, dais. He seemed to be the leader, haughty and battle-scarred; the aforementioned Chancellor. *'What sort of purpose do you have here?'*

'Accidentally passing through,' the Doctor said.

'Middle Folk do not simply pass through... and you are rather pale for one.'

'He is sickly,' the Master interrupted. *'My brother's pallor has long been an issue since we were small.'*

'Koschei,' the Doctor hissed. His ire made the Master smirk thinly.

'You have had my brother for a while now. I was sent to fetch him.'

'Then why,' the Chancellor wondered, *'was off-world tech found near where each of you were captured?'*

'A necessity in our neutrality,' the Master replied. *"Those cabinets–"*

'–those TARDISEs are dangerous tech,' the Chancellor said, cutting her off. It would be more difficult to fool him, it would seem. *'Soon as we are able to figure out how to access them, we will use them to destroy our enemy.'*

'A TARDIS is not a killing machine,' the Doctor stated. *'To think of them as being anything even close to a weapon is dangerous.'*

'I will not be lectured by a sickly coward,' the Chancellor scowled. The Doctor

hardened his own glare, a move the Master had seen many times before.

‘The only coward here is the one hiding while others die in his name, fighting what he feels is a just battle, though not just enough to risk his own life. If you do not show your own soldiers this mercy, then I hate to imagine what lengths you will go to punish your enemies.’

‘Place them in confinement until we can get a hold of the Middle Folk and ransom them. Otherwise, I hear nothing of or from them.’

The soldiers on either side of the Master and the Doctor clicked their heels and saluted before bringing their charges out of the room. As soon as they were out of the chamber, the psychic interference stopped, enabling the Time Lords to silently communicate again.

‘*Way to act the noble player,*’ the Master teased as they were blindfolded again. The Doctor did not answer her. ‘*Theta?*’

‘*Promise me you will show him mercy,*’ the Doctor responded coldly. ‘*He needs to be taught that.*’

‘*Mercy...? That buffoon would squander it.*’

‘*Promise me.*’

‘*Fine – I promise.*’

The moment they could see again, the Master and the Doctor were in another holding cell, this one made of brushed steel and harsh lights and built for a single occupant. They were uncuffed and left alone, their captors clearly underestimating their prisoners.

‘Mercy...?’ the Master hissed soon as their jailers’ footsteps faded. ‘I’ve been meeting plenty of you that are just shells in these other dimensions, but *mercy*?! As incompetent as the others have been, that’s something I’ve *never* heard out of your mouth, not in this context.’

The Doctor considered this and nodded. ‘You’re from another dimension? That explains a bit.’ He looked at her cautiously, gnawing the knuckle of his forefinger. ‘I guess I’m a bit... different in your native coordinates?’

‘You are feared and respected throughout the galaxies as a force to be reckoned with,’ she fired back. ‘You topple empires and hold court on others at your whim! Your name strikes fear in the hearts of trillions!’

‘...and how are you certain that is not the version of me who stands before you?’

‘...because the version of you I grew up with – even the many versions of you I’ve been stumbling across – have never requested something as trite as *mercy*.’ She glared at him, unamused. ‘Now I’m stuck on Genoai, with a version of my brother that somehow pales to the rest of these dimensions’ *rejects*, and I don’t even know how I’m going to get out, only that he *wants mercy for their leader*. This is not the Theta Sigma that took down our entire planet for a laugh.’

‘...and how did you know that I never did?’ he asked. She narrowed her eyes further, sensing something fierce – something bubbling over – in the ghost of her brother before her.

‘You couldn’t have.’

‘That’s the thing about war, Koschei: it shows a side of us no one ever thought possible.’ He went over to the bunk and laid down, lacing his fingers together as his hands rested on his torso. ‘Don’t pretend to know who I am or what I’ve done.’

‘I know what it is you *haven’t* done.’

The Doctor laid there, deigning no response to her sneering accusation. In a huff, the Master took the chair that was in the corner and sat down, arms crossed around her chest and ankle resting on her knee. This Doctor was infuriating, and there seemed to be no end to how deeply she could source her ire. He could be *great*... if only he had been like the child she grew up knowing.

Time passed slowly, with the Doctor and the Master maintaining a relative silence. Every so often, food and water would arrive, one serving split between them, and they would share the meals without words. Old Academy habits cropped up as they ate, drank, slept, and even paced about the cell. They kept to themselves – verbally and mentally – and it was likely for the best.

‘*If I ever get back to my native time coordinates, I will never leave his side again,*’ the Master thought as the Doctor threw her a piece of fruit from the newest tray. She took a bite and spit out a seed; the being before her was a conundrum. How could he be what he insinuated – a man built by war – and yet still demand *mercy*? The word, it nagged at her as the hours passed.

Mercy.

Why, of all things, *mercy*?

He still played with sonics like a child and dressed like some wanderlust-struck cretin... what could he possibly know? Have possibly done?

How could he be Theta Sigma and believe in mercy?

Eventually, more soldiers arrived, opening up the cell door. An important-looking one stepped in, holding himself in a resolute stance.

‘You are to be judged,’ the Genoae soldier announced. Others came in and cuffed the Master and the Doctor again – time for another walk.

The pair were guided back to the chamber, where it seemed as though there were even more people than before. Scores upon scores of Genoae were gathered to watch the judgement, making the air itself buzz with anticipation, tension, and curiosity, helped along by whispers and psychic interference.

‘Middle Folk,’ the chancellor frowned as they approached. His voice boomed over everyone and everything, bringing at least the voices to a hush. ‘You have been charged with spying and subterfuge; the penalties for either of those in this time of war is death. This is absolute.’

The whispers started up again, until the Chancellor raised his hand to bring a hush over the hall.

‘Any last request?’

‘I have one,’ the Master said. ‘That my brother and I be uncuffed once more so that we might embrace as siblings should for one last time.’

The Chancellor considered, then nodded. ‘That does not seem unreasonable, since you are unarmed and under guard...’ He snapped his fingers twice and the guards freed their prisoners.

Everyone watched as the Master held her arms open, waiting for the Doctor to join her.

‘Brother,’ she said, her voice nearly tender. When he did not respond, she stepped towards him, enveloping him in a hug. His forearms sat awkwardly on either side of her torso as he barely accepted the gesture; it made many in the chamber snicker at the thought of them with their own siblings.

‘Koschei...’ he muttered.

‘Don’t worry, Brother – I will show him mercy,’ she promised. She then held him at arm’s length, staring him straight in the eyes. ‘It is what he deserves.’

At that, the Master raised her hand, showing that she had lifted the sonic screwdriver from the Doctor’s pocket. His eyes grew wide at the realisation and he tried to stop her before it was too late. She pointed it at one of the hinges high on the ceiling and it snapped. There was a panic as wires gave way and things collapsed onto varying Genoae senators. A beam came loose from somewhere and fell directly onto the dais, killing the chancellor.

Panic became chaos.

After snatching the sonic screwdriver back from the Master, the Doctor made for the exit, dodging soldiers and onlookers alike. They were both able to slip out of the chamber unnoticed, with the pair running towards their TARDISEs.

‘You could have killed us!’ the Doctor snapped as they turned a corner. Wow... his run was *rubbish*.

‘I didn’t, did I?’

‘...and how was killing him the best alternative?! I wanted them to live, to know what it was like to be spared! There could have been real, lasting change on this planet thanks to a single act of mercy... and you *ruined it*.’

‘I did what I had to.’ Ah-ha! Yes! There was the blue box and silver stall. ‘It was necessary.’

‘It never is.’

The Doctor’s glare met her and she instantly saw what she had been looking for this entire time: in his eyes she saw reflected the Theta Sigma of her youth, of her native dimension, and all his fire and fury. His was the glare of the Time Lord that could take down the entire Council without so much as a word, who could topple empires at a whim, who could go ahead and commit genocide if it was deemed best for the universe, even if it were his own people. It was the glare of one so powerful that their very name struck fear in all those who heard it.

This was her Doctor.

‘It was a mercy to take him out now instead of allowing someone else to do it later, better that than to be cruelly tortured to death,’ she said with a slight smirk. ‘He has died a hero and a martyr, with a legacy that will take centuries to tarnish; it is the most astute mercy there is.’

The Doctor exhaled angrily and went into his TARDIS, slamming the door behind him. Moments later it vanished, flung back into the time vortex.

‘There she is! The Middle Folk!’

Oh yes, that’s right: she was being pursued by some rather angry Genoa soldiers.

‘Pity; I don’t have the patience for you today,’ she tutted. ‘Until next time.’

She stepped inside her TARDIS and snapped her fingers, closing the door and putting the ship into drive.

Hopefully she’d run into this Doctor again someday... *after* he came to his senses.

The Deadly Alliance

Nathan Mullins

His name was the Master. In his mind, he was King. He could do no wrong. How could he, with a name like *the Master*? He was never up to any good, always looking for trouble, and had a habit of getting into scrapes. He was nearing the end of his regeneration cycle. His body was beginning to wear thin. The very matter he was made up of was beginning to break down. The rags he wore to conceal his scars were frayed and unsightly. He was on the verge of death. He just hoped he had enough left in him to shake the universe to its core. To him, it was far from being all over!

Forristan was once a peaceful world, until the arrival of a being from the stars. It was thought to be an uninhabited paradise, a tropical wilderness of immense beauty. Colonists had claimed it for themselves, but it was to be their undoing. Below their flourishing city was another realm entirely, that of a species known as the Grigrosh. In appearance, they most resembled the grizzly bears of the planet Earth. They were furry and formidable. They walked upright on their hind legs and could tear a person to shreds with their claws. The colonists had no knowledge of their existence, until a creature of immense evil came between them. This evil had a name. It called itself *Master*. It was he who sparked a war to end all wars.

The Colony's Intelligence Committee were unable to convince those in power of the devastation a war would bring about. Well aware of the risks posed to them by their enemies, they drew up a strategy on how best to survive such a cataclysmic event and put their scheme into operation. The five agents left to execute this plan were all known to each other. All had been passed the responsibility of saving their species, one way or another. And knowing they were beaten meant falling back and retreating, so long as their hearts were still beating.

As for the mysterious alien who'd brought both species into conflict, he had vanished as swiftly as he'd arrived, but were he ever to turn up again, the agents swore they would take their revenge.

Agents Greta and Daniel Smith had tied the knot just three years back. They'd met on the Serconisphere in their mid-twenties. They were young and they were happy, until the war on the planet Forristan brought misery and terror. Now they were tactically running for their lives, but at least they had each other.

'We'll never make it!' exclaimed Greta, short of breath, as she came to a halt beside Daniel. They had reached the trenches on the front line.

'Of course we will,' Daniel told her. 'Words like those will only hold us back. Think positive!'

He smiled at her and she blushed, her cheeks flushing pink, before her lips curled upwards back at him.

'Is your weapon loaded?' he asked her, whilst surveying their surroundings, binoculars held to his face.

'Was that a euphemism?' Greta wondered. 'You better not be serious! But yes, it is, as I hope yours is too.'

'We'd best head off,' said Daniel, kissing his wife on her forehead. 'We've not much time.'

'Um, what were you saying about being positive?' Greta quipped, rolling her eyes.

Together, they made their way across to the portal and vanished into the night.

Agents Cody and Sharna Sparks were also husband and wife. They too had met on their home planet, the Serconisphere. Like their friends (who had gone ahead of them through the portal), they'd risked life and limb to make it this far, but now found themselves in the trenches, wondering if they would see the light of day.

'Right, it's our turn,' said Sharna, as she turned to Cody. 'Are you ready?'

'I was born re...' he uttered as Sharna held a finger to his lips.

'Shush,' she hissed. His eyes narrowed as a Grigrosh appeared out of nowhere. It didn't move. It remained perfectly still. Its bright hazel eyes shone brightly in the darkness.

'Where did that come from?' he muttered, as he copied Sharna and lay flat against the ground, hidden by the mist which covered them.

'I've no idea,' she mumbled, her words muffled. 'Just shut up a minute.'

The Grigrosh turned and vanished into the blackness of the night. Luckily, the mist which had come down from the mountains on the horizon now covered much of the planet's surface. It was as if the universe had plotted with them - the best means of escape. If it wasn't by going out '*all guns blazing*', (which the universe didn't care for at all), then it was by slipping away quietly and unnoticed.

'Well, that was a miracle!' she said, suddenly cheerful again. 'Sometimes, I think you're really better off just taking orders from me.'

'You know, I'm inclined to agree,' smiled Cody as Sharna took his hand, her fingers between his. They climbed over the top of the trench and disappeared. The portal, drowning out all other sounds, had already transported them to their new destination.

Agent Joyce Bell enjoyed the fight. She was born on the Serconisphere, in the Asindon Galaxy. She'd been a soldier, but was now a Strategist. When the Serconisphere Colony ships left for the planet Forristan, she had been one of the first on-board. Then, soon after the war between her species and the Grigrosh had broken out, she had begun to lead the resistance against them. Without her leadership, those she served alongside would not have escaped. Now, she had to flee herself.

Biding her time, she waited until the moment was right before joining her compatriots. But something was wrong. She wasn't herself. And suddenly, she saw *him*. The Master. His image in her mind. He was laughing, cackling, like an old crone.

'What are you waiting for?' he snapped.

She blinked and made her move.

The Serconispheres had built a metropolis which had fallen at their feet. The Grigrosh emerged from below the surface and declared war against them. The Serconispheres fought back, but the two species were equally matched, and it had nearly brought them to extinction.

Once Joyce had gathered her thoughts, she ran for her life, closing the gap between herself and her friends. The portal beamed her across space in a matter of seconds, and she materialised on board a space station. Artificial lights came on all around, and she saw her friends ahead of her. It took them a moment to adjust to their new surroundings.

The brightness of the lights triggered a memory. A flashback, of her encounter with the Master, and what exactly he had done to her.

Joyce had gone into the jungle in a final act of defiance. The Grigrosh wanted blood as much as she did. There'd been losses on both sides. Through the tops of trees, she could make out the stars of the Asindon Galaxy, shining brightly. Somewhere out there was the Serconisphere. She thought of home when an old grandfather clock appeared.

She stopped abruptly in her tracks as a being emerged from within and realised that he'd drawn some unwanted attention.

'Who the hell are you?' demanded Joyce, taking small steps towards him, slowly. She drew her gun, intent on using it at the first sign of trouble.

'I am what you will become,' he said terrifyingly.

'Wha...' began Joyce, but then she was consumed by light. The Master approached her and the two became one.

'I am the Master,' he said. He spoke through her. She was miming his words. 'I started this war, and now... I will end it.' She screamed and then there was silence. He was now a part of her. 'You will do what I command,' he said, speaking to her from inside her own mind. 'Until such a time as I deem necessary.'

Joyce wasn't herself. She hadn't been for some time. During the war with the Grigrosh, it seemed the Joyce everyone assumed they knew had changed. She plotted a way to save her species, although many of her fellow colonists had been wiped out. Now there were just four Serconispheres left. But the Grigrosh had other ideas. Genocide.

The Serconispheres, who hurt no one and had refused to fight, were slaughtered anyway. Those who held down jobs that earned them the credits to provide for their families, were killed senselessly. That was when those closest to Joyce saw something new in her, something they'd never seen before. Rage.

The Joyce before the war was calm, logical, and showed real empathy, but it was on her penultimate night on Forristan that she disappeared for one final fight. Her comrades suspected she was looking for the one known as *the Master*.

The being that was said had goaded both sides until the deadly war was upon them. She later returned to her friends, covered in the blood of their enemies, with no word on where she'd been, or what horror she'd inflicted.

Greta stared out from the observation deck at the planet she had left behind. A tear rolled down her cheek. She sensed her husband's presence behind her, but didn't turn to face him. She asked semi-rhetorical questions she ought to have known the answers to, yet couldn't fathom what they were.

'How's it possible that five minutes ago our lives were a mess, we had nothing left, we were homeless, afraid, but held onto the belief that one woman would save us... and she DID!'

'That's the power our belief has, my love, and look at how well it's worked for us. I couldn't have pictured this, either. Joyce is a hero.'

They embraced. Daniel held Greta tightly in his arms and they kissed, passionately.

Joyce, however, was quietly contemplating their future. Little did her *'friends'* know they'd been specially chosen, for they would serve in her conquest of the galaxy!

She checked her watch. It was time. A shockwave shook the space station to its very core. Greta and Daniel had caught sight of an explosion, which appeared to have emanated from Forristan. The reverberations were felt by all concerned.

'What was that?' shrieked Sharna, picking herself up off the floor.

'Everybody... to the windows... come and see!' yelled Greta.

All of them rushed over to find out what was happening. None of them could believe their eyes. They watched as a huge mushroom shaped cloud covered the entire circumference of the planet. It was terrifying!

'What is that?' began Daniel.

'I wouldn't like to speculate,' said Cody.

'But we all agree it was a bomb?' supposed Greta. 'Nothing could survive that!'

'But how?' mumbled Sharna.

'The Forristan Arsenal, presumably?' replied Cody.

‘Correct,’ said Joyce, as she approached them, sinisterly. ‘Good diversion tactic. Not needed obviously, considering we got off the surface without injury.’

‘You did this?’ cried Cody, dampening the tears in his eyes with his sleeve.

‘Well, it *was* implied.’ She was practically boasting. Her arrogance was frightening. She was proud of what she’d done.

Sharna was fuming, as was Daniel, who himself wanted to attack her, but Cody got in front with Greta blocking him in his stride.

‘Why? WHY would you do this? None of us wanted THIS!’ shouted Sharna. ‘While the Grigrosh killed many of our own people, I would never have wished for them to suffer like we suffered.’

‘Sharna’s right!’ exclaimed Greta. ‘You’re not JUST a killer. You’re a MONSTER, too!!’

‘Alright. I accept you’re angry.’ Joyce was firm. Her tone - authoritative. ‘I know that it was a tad extreme.’

‘A tad extreme?’ repeated Cody. ‘A tad...’ he trailed off.

Joyce was unrepentant. ‘The Grigrosh had become far more bloodthirsty than you know. Our people were butchered, cut down like fire wood and then thrown on the...’ She stopped short of finishing her sentence.

‘None of what you say matters!’ said Daniel. ‘You don’t speak for us. Not anymore!’

The group huddled as if making key decisions that would establish all of their fates. When they turned to make them known to Joyce, she’d fled.

‘ARGH!’ protested Daniel. ‘Why didn’t we tie her up first? Of course she was going to do a runner!’

‘Because we’re EXHAUSTED. All of us. And we thought... I thought... all our troubles were behind us,’ said Sharna, weeping.

Cody held her comfortingly, and she buried her head into his chest.

‘Well, she won’t get far,’ huffed Daniel, as he held Greta in his arms. ‘This isn’t where it ends. One last sickening act of revenge. She’ll pay. For EVERYTHING!’

Three hours later:

‘Jamie, Victoria, we’ve landed.’

The Doctor’s companions came rushing from beyond the console room

carrying a vast array of snacks.

‘I say, you’ve enough there between you!’ said the Doctor.

‘Aye, well... one wee snack isn’t going to fill us up, is it?’ replied Jamie.
‘Where are we this time?’

‘A space station, by the looks of things – a long way ahead in both of your futures. It’s the year 2075. We were headed to Forristan originally, a beautifully colourful haven unlike anywhere else in the universe. Much of the planet is covered in vegetation and foliage, where the Serconisphers haven’t built skyscrapers in its place. Unfortunately, however, we were drawn off course.’

‘Do you know any more about why we’re here, Doctor?’ enquired Victoria.

‘Only that what I responded to was a cry for help, an SOS sent out into time and space.’

‘And no one’s responded? To the signal, I mean?’ asked Jamie.

‘It’s difficult to tell. You see, this space station we’ve arrived on isn’t from where the signal was transmitted, but it was the closest we could get to where it did originate from. According to the instruments, space craft aren’t permitted to land on Forristan, but there does appear to be a portal linking this very space station to the planet.’

‘Then we must intervene!’ declared Victoria. ‘It’s our moral duty!’

‘And that is why we are here,’ confirmed the Doctor. ‘Come along!’

The Doctor, Victoria, and Jamie stepped out into a dark tunnel aboard the space station.

‘Dear oh dear,’ muttered the Doctor, looking about, unimpressed. ‘I don’t like this at all.’

‘What don’t you like?’ asked Jamie, feeling his way from the TARDIS to where the Doctor had wandered off to. He walked into him with a clatter.

‘What you’ve just demonstrated,’ he said, amusingly. ‘We can’t see who or what may be lurking in the darkness.’

There were what sounded like footsteps approaching. The Doctor and Jamie decided their best bet was to evade capture. The tunnel led to a clearing, which branched off in several directions.

‘Right Jamie... pick a tunnel, and then go with your gut, and hopefully... we’ll meet again soon. Have you got that?’

‘Yes,’ he answered, in a whisper. ‘I’ll see you later, Doctor.’

‘Yes, now go!’

The strangers’ footsteps were getting nearer and nearer. After choosing a tunnel himself, the Doctor disappeared along it.

‘Doctor... Jamie... are you still there?’ called Victoria as she walked around the other side of the TARDIS. The dark made it impossible to see clearly. ‘Doctor? Jamie?’ she trembled. Then, she froze. She could just glimpse the outline of a figure ahead of her, but it was neither the Doctor nor Jamie. Lights came on around her. ‘Who are you?’ she shrieked as she stumbled backwards.

‘My name’s Agent Sparks. Sharna Sparks. Who are you?’

‘Victoria Waterfield,’ she announced. ‘I came here with two gentlemen who go by the names of the Doctor and Jamie McCrimmon.’

‘How did you come aboard?’

‘In this blue box,’ she answered as she leaned against it.

‘And where are your friends now?’ asked Sharna.

‘I wish I knew. What I’d say to them if they were here!’

‘Have you no idea as to where they were headed?’

‘No,’ said Victoria. ‘They’re always wandering off. Probably just searching for clues!’

‘What do you mean, clues?’

‘We were summoned. We answered a distress signal. The Doctor said we couldn’t very well ignore it. That’s how we ended up here.’

‘But we never sent out a distress signal!’ stated Sharna.

‘That’s because it wasn’t sent from here,’ explained Victoria. ‘This was as close as we could get to the planet Forristan. That’s where the signal was sent from!’

‘But that’s impossible! After what we saw happen to the planet, how could a signal have been sent?’

‘I... I don’t know,’ shrugged Victoria. She didn’t know any more than she did.

‘Come along, Victoria. Should your friends be searching for you, the observation deck is the most likely place for a reunion!’

A Historic Record of Events, Referring to the Planet Forristan. Procured from the Sparks Family Archive from the Year 2075:

In the midst of the Forristan Conflict, with no end in sight, the Grigrosh ran. This was a first. They fled, terrified. This wasn't the way they fought conflicts. Something had forced them to change tack. They weren't prone to making about-turns. Usually, their ruthlessness was a strength which they could rely on, not a weakness which held them back. And if just one Grigrosh turned and ran in the opposite direction to its enemy, then it was because it knew it didn't stand a chance! One Grigrosh retreating was a big deal. To its comrades, it was enough to stand down an entire army – and when news broke of what had so terrified the Grigrosh warrior, the species called an immediate ceasefire and retreated back underground.

The Serconisphers were not alerted to this, except for the woman who had caused it. A woman whose body was no longer her own, but that of a creature of evil intent. It had stolen her form, emptied her soul, stripped her mind, and used her as a vehicle. The part she would play in the destruction of Forristan would only come to light after the event.

Joyce led the Grigrosh into a trap. Aware of her pursual, she ran through the jungle calling out to her enemies.

'Come on! What are you waiting for? Don't you want to kill me?'

Bolts of energy fired from the Grigrosh blasters and zigzagged past her.

'You're a rubbish shot!' she bellowed, taking the rise out of her assassin. 'I'm surprised you made the cut as a warrior of your species. I wouldn't even go into battle with you... and that's saying something!'

Her wisecracks struck a nerve. The Grigrosh slung its blaster over its shoulder, charging after her. Joyce picked up the pace. She knew where she was headed. The Forristan Arsenal.

Joyce ran on, finding her way inside, followed closely by the warrior that had pursued her. The warrior knew not what Joyce had planned, but it realised what it was up against.

Joyce had primed a device that would set off a chain of explosions, one after the other. The timer had begun ticking. She wanted to send the Grigrosh a clear message. When the warrior broke through inside the arsenal, it was too late. Nothing could be done to halt the countdown.

Joyce had gone – escaped with time to spare, and led her friends to safety. The warrior turned and burst through the doors, fleeing in a fit of rage and fear – not only for itself, but for its entire species. It spread news of the Serconisphers' last deadly act of revenge, and the Grigrosh went underground. But before doing so, a distress call was sent out. The Doctor and his companions would arrive too

late to answer it, as would their deadly enemies. It would change everything.

Jamie nervously crept along the silent tunnel, not knowing what he'd find at the end of it. He came across a huge steel door and sighed, leaning on it. Activated by Jamie's touch, the door split in the middle and opened sideways.

'Err, hello?' he called. 'Anyone there?' He didn't expect an answer.

'Hello,' came a female voice from somewhere ahead of him. Lights sprung to life in that part of the tunnel and a woman strolled out of the darkness towards him.

'Who are you?' he asked, taking a step back.

She stopped and tried to reassure him by making eye contact with him and smiling. She meant him no harm.

'It's okay,' she said, 'you can trust me. My name's Joyce. Agent Joyce Bell. Who are you?'

Jamie was encouraged by her friendliness.

'Jamie McCrimmon,' he said as they shook hands. 'Where am I? What is this place?'

'Soon to be known as the Decimation Ring,' she answered.

'*The Decimation Ring*'?' he repeated.

'The space station, McCrimmon. The power it generates could be a terrible weapon in the wrong hands.'

Jamie saw a terrible glint in her eye. He suddenly felt the impact of her words. Perhaps she wasn't to be trusted after all. As he backed away, he held her gaze, and the words 'I will obey you, *Master*,' left his lips.

'Good,' said Joyce. 'Your first objective shall be to retrieve my TARDIS for me. It is located on the planet Forristan. Once you have found it, set the clock face to twelve. It is programmed to return to this space station. After that, you are to wait for my orders. Go now.' She watched him disappear back the way he came.

The Doctor had made it to the space deck. Greta caught sight of him and alerted the others.

'Who the hell are you?' spat Daniel.

‘The Doctor,’ he answered.

‘And where’ve you come from, Doctor? Were you already on board?’

The questions kept on coming. If not from Daniel, then from Greta. Cody looked on.

‘What’s your purpose here?’ Greta asked him.

‘To help,’ explained the Doctor. ‘I didn’t come here alone, but with two friends. We received a distress signal from the planet Forristan.’ He saw how shocked the faces were of those around him. ‘But judging by your expressions, it’s something you know nothing about?’

‘You’re right,’ said Daniel. ‘We don’t.’

‘Why don’t you?’ asked the Doctor. ‘Aren’t you the crew of this space station? Isn’t it your job to know these things?’

‘No, it isn’t, and we’re not the original crew.’

‘Not the original crew? How very odd...’ mused the Doctor. ‘Any idea what happened to them?’

Daniel, Greta, and Cody each shook their heads.

‘But this is no ordinary space station,’ gathered the Doctor. ‘It’s a security hub, monitoring and protecting the universe beyond. If inactive for any lengthy period of time, there’ll be worlds out there left vulnerable and defenceless. Just think of what that means!’

Daniel was growing frustrated.

‘Forristan was at war, Doctor. There are five of us on-board who made it out alive. Perhaps those who ran this *‘security hub’* as you call it, fled in fear of their own lives, too.’

‘If that’s so,’ said the Doctor, ‘they don’t know what they’ve done!’

‘Doctor!’ hollered Victoria, as she appeared from a door, escorted by Sharna.

‘Not another one!’ exclaimed Cody. ‘Who the devil are these people?’

‘We travel in space and time,’ replied Victoria as she rushed across the room towards the Doctor. ‘Is Jamie with you?’

‘No,’ he whispered. ‘But he’ll be about. I expect he’s on his way here now!’

‘There’s one way to make certain of that,’ eavesdropped Daniel. ‘Greta, hunny, bring up the CCTV monitors.’

‘That’s awfully good of you,’ said the Doctor. ‘We don’t mean to be of any trouble.’

‘It’s too late for that,’ grumbled Cody.

Greta did as was asked of her and signalled to the Doctor and Victoria that she’d found him.

‘Oh, good,’ he grinned. ‘Where is he?’
‘Making his way towards a blue box,’ said Greta. ‘What is that?’
‘It’s my ship,’ said the Doctor. ‘It’s how we came to be here. But what’s Jamie doing there?’

Jamie was mumbling the words ‘*I will obey!*’ and he was saying them over and over again. He came to a halt when he’d reached the TARDIS.

‘Enter!’ hissed the words of his mind-controller as the instruction entered his thoughts. He remembered the Doctor kept a key above the ‘Police Public Call Box’ sign, and in no time had gained access to the console unit.

‘I will guide your movements,’ the voice told him. ‘I will project an image of the Doctor in your place. The TARDIS will be fooled into thinking that you, McCrimmon, are the Doctor, and she will give you control.’

Jamie, now looking like a clone of the Doctor, was able to plot a course to the planet Forristan. The blue box began to dematerialise to the sound of manic laughter.

‘What just happened?’ frowned Daniel, turning back from the monitors to face the Doctor. He had just watched the blue box disappear, with the Doctor’s friend inside it.

‘The TARDIS dematerialised. As to where it’s headed, I know not.’

‘We can track it,’ insisted Greta. ‘This security hub has incredible means of doing so. From the image of your space ship alone, we can scan the entire Asindon Galaxy for it. Finding a match for it shouldn’t prove difficult.’

‘Well, that’ll help,’ replied the Doctor. ‘Meanwhile, can one of you rewind the footage showing my companion Jamie as he walks towards the TARDIS?’

‘Of course,’ said Greta, doing so until the Doctor said ‘stop.’

‘Can you zoom in on him,’ he asked. ‘Ah, yes, see there,’ he said, as Greta played back the footage. It showed Jamie saying something, possibly out loud.

‘Is there sound?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ confirmed Cody. ‘One moment.’

He put on his headset and Greta replayed the footage.

‘As best as I can work out, something about ‘*I will obey?*’

‘Then it means he’s under some form of influence, by someone or something.’ The Doctor rubbed his chin, curiously. ‘Have you any more footage of Jamie before we see him enter the TARDIS?’

‘Yes,’ said Greta. ‘He’s seen on this camera, further along the tunnel talking to Joyce.’

‘And being a bit over-friendly, going by the stance she’s taking with him. She must be behind this.’

‘Now, hold on a minute,’ urged Daniel. ‘As much as we all take a strong view of Joyce right now, why would she have anything to do with you people, considering you have nothing to do with us?’

‘Why wouldn’t she?’ blurted the Doctor. ‘After everything you’ve told me so far, I wouldn’t trust her one bit. Besides, I know Jamie. He wouldn’t go off on his own somewhere, unless, he was under hypnosis! Yes! That *must* be it!’

‘Doctor,’ said Sharna, from over his shoulder. ‘I’ve located your TARDIS.’

‘Oh goody,’ he beamed. ‘Where’s the old girl got to?’

‘It would seem, the planet Forristan.’

Whilst the Doctor and the new crew members worked to establish the facts, a spacecraft came up on the monitors. It flew low over the space station. The reverberations it caused were tremendous!

‘Where did that come from?’ shrieked Sharna

Daniel checked his instruments.

‘The readings I have here would suggest its trajectory began on Forristan!’

‘That’s impossible!’ stated Greta.

‘Apparently not,’ observed the Doctor.

Daniel watched it closely on the monitors. ‘It looks as if it might attempt to...’

‘...dock?’ finished Cody. ‘That’s precisely what it is doing!’

‘Oh my giddy aunt,’ mumbled the Doctor. ‘Call it a hunch, Victoria, but I think we’ll be wanting to find Jamie, before things take a turn for the worst!’

A Dalek disembarked from the spacecraft in question. Its silver dome swivelled round, surveying its surroundings. It had now boarded the space station.

‘Alien life forms detected!’ it reported.

A gold Dalek monitored its position from aboard the spacecraft.
'Find and exterminate any aliens!'
The Dalek's eye stalk nodded before its dome lights flickered into life.
'I obey!'

From her hide-out aboard the Space Station, Joyce/the Master controlled Jamie's thoughts and movements as he walked out of the TARDIS and onto the surface of Forristan.

He was in awe of his surroundings. Swathes of smoke drifted towards him. The planet had been completely ravaged. He was under Joyce's spell, and she'd sent him to his death. The air was difficult to breathe. The heat was stifling. Sweat poured down Jamie's face. But he remained calm. He had one mission: to find his master's TARDIS. He ventured on into the smoke, shielding his eyes from the eye-watering spectacle of it all.

'What is that?' hesitated Sharna, watching the small squat mobile tank glide into view on their CCTV monitors.

'A Dalek,' replied the Doctor.

'What's a Dalek?' fretted Cody.

'The epitome of evil, but you needn't fear, so long as you do as *I* say.'

'As *you* say?' repeated Daniel. 'And who the hell put *you* in charge?'

'I did,' replied the Doctor, 'and as a matter of fact, you ought to be extremely grateful that I have.'

A woman entered the observation deck, boldly and without fear of the enemies she'd made among the Serconisphers.

'Oh no! You have it wrong, old man!'

'Do I?' snapped the Doctor. 'And just *who* are you?'

'The name's Joyce,' she bellowed, 'and I'm in charge here, and anyone who isn't me can button it. That's a direct order!'

'Alright, Joyce... say your space station is about to be overrun with the most hostile alien life forms you've yet encountered? You thought the Grigrosh were bad enough, but brace yourself for the onslaught to end all onslaughts!'

'I'm in charge here, Doctor. I shall not relinquish control, not given what's at

stake. The space station is a gateway to the universe beyond. A whole other universe, shielded and protected by this place. Think of the power used to do this.’ She paused for dramatic effect. ‘Just imagine what would happen if I converted this station into a weapon, using the very power it generates to keep the universe safe against it. I would be elevated to the most powerful ruler in the cosmos. The *Decimation Ring*, as it shall be known, will guarantee it!’

‘You’re insane!’ said the Doctor.

Her associates looked from Joyce to the Doctor and then back again, suddenly confused and terrified.

‘And what’s to become of us?’ demanded Greta.

‘You will serve your new master!’ commanded Joyce.

In the chaos that ensued, as the crew panicked among themselves, bickering and demanding answers, the Doctor and Victoria snuck away.

‘Guys!’ yelled Cody, over the top of them. ‘The Doctor and Victoria... they’ve escaped!’

‘WHAT?’ fumed Joyce. ‘HOW? Which of you took your eyes off of them?’

The others shot her a look of anger. Joyce knew as well as they did that she hadn’t issued them with instructions.

‘You don’t even know what’s going on here!’ she scowled. ‘Not really. Not even for a moment.’

All of them watched as a creature so harrowing, so utterly disturbing, appeared within Joyce’s form, as if it were merged with her. It was lifeless. Faded. And then it walked forward, solidified, and its eyes opened – finally seeing the world from its own perspective, and not through the husk that was once Joyce.

It had stunned those she’d saved. All of them were speechless. None could find the words, except for the creature itself.

Pleased with the outcome, it took in its first proper breath. ‘How good it is to have had my life force renewed,’ it said, triumphantly. ‘The woman’s body was merely temporary. I used her to recharge. It was *I* who rescued you from Forristan. You have me to thank for your being here.’

‘Who are you? What are you?’ begged Greta.

‘I am the Master. I’m a Time Lord. I’ve lived for over thousands of years. And you and your associates will think yourselves lucky I spared your puny, insignificant lives.’

‘Why?’ demanded Sharna. ‘What do you want?’

‘Power. I have already wiped out the Grigrosh. But the Decimation Ring goes further. It’s the ultimate weapon.’

‘You monster!’

‘Careful, Daniel. That’s your first warning. Or shall I kill you now?’

Daniel squared up to the creature. He wasn’t afraid.

‘And how might you kill me?’ He jabbed the Master in the chest. ‘You’re not armed.’

‘Don’t be silly,’ hissed the monster facing him. ‘Was I armed when I killed Joyce?’

A devilish smile crept onto the Master’s face. Daniel couldn’t look at him for any longer than he had to. The Master was visibly decaying, rotting, his flesh peeling away from his bones, his eyes ready to pop. His body, whilst renewed, remained scarred and beaten.

‘Don’t make me...’

‘What?’ argued the Master. ‘You’ll do what?’

Daniel wasn’t a man of violence, but now he was faced with a choice, to show courage or cowardice. He looked to those he’d travelled to the space station with.

‘Run!’ he said. ‘Go! Get out of here whilst you still can. I’ll buy you time! Hurry!’

Greta stepped forward and took her partner’s hand.

‘We came here together, my love. I won’t leave you now. Not after all we’ve been through.’

She looked back over her shoulder, at Cody and Sharna.

‘Go on!’ she urged them. ‘Go now!’

They fled, to the sound of their friend’s screams behind them.

‘Where are we headed?’ panted Sharna, gasping for breath.

‘After the Doctor,’ said Cody. ‘If anyone can help us, he can!’

It wasn’t long until Jamie had found what he was looking for. By this time, his tartan kilt was grubby, and his white rags were even scruffier. The Master had guided him to what little there remained of a jungle. This was where Joyce herself had succumbed to the Time Lord. It was where his TARDIS was found by Jamie, partly concealed in the undergrowth. He set the clock face to twelve,

as had been dictated to him, and stood back as the grandfather clock dematerialised.

‘It’s done,’ he said, aloud.

‘You have done well,’ came the Master’s telepathic response. ‘Your service to me is at an end. Die, Mr McCrimmon, die a most painfully slow death.’

Jamie stopped in his tracks, rubbed his head, and blinked a few times. He realised he was in great danger.

The Master stood back from the observation deck as his TARDIS materialised before him.

‘Fantastic!’ he enthused. ‘Oh, fantastic!’

The doors to the observation deck slid back, and one of the most terrifying creatures the universe had known, glided in. With Jamie no longer a concern, he addressed the Dalek in the room.

‘What in the name of Rassilon are you doing here?’

‘I do not answer to humans,’ came the predictable Dalek response.

‘But I’m not human,’ said the Master.

The Dalek scanned him, raising its sucker arm to take a reading from him.

‘Two hearts,’ it spluttered. ‘You are a Time Lord.’

‘Correct,’ replied the Master. ‘And what you don’t know is, unlike the rest of my species, I don’t go in for light conversation.’

He produced a small weapon from his pocket.

‘What is the purpose of that device?’ enquired the Dalek.

‘It miniaturises interfering busy-bodies like yourself, rendering them useless. Don’t force me to use it on you. I won’t hesitate if provoked. Now, I demand you tell me what it is you came here for!’

‘POWER!’ screeched the silver and blue pepperpot.

The Master smiled.

‘It’s what I seek, too. Would you deny me of that?’

‘You will make your case to the Supreme Dalek.’

It was thanks to the Master that Forristan had all but been obliterated. There was nothing to indicate it was once home to two mighty civilisations. In wiping out all life on Forristan, the Master had given the Daleks a gift. A second Skaro. A chance to expand their empire.

‘Doctor... where are we going?’ asked Victoria wearily.

‘The space station is linked by a portal, remember, a portal to the planet Forristan. It’s there that we’ll find Jamie. He’s in a lot of trouble, and if we don’t get to him in time, I’m afraid he doesn’t stand a chance!’

He tried to be brave, but Victoria could see through him.

‘Doctor... I’ve seen that look on your face before. The time we encountered the Daleks. It’s them, isn’t it? That spacecraft we saw... it was theirs! Any idea what they’re up to? They murdered my father, remember! I need to know. It’s important!’

‘I suspect they, like Joyce, are after the same thing. Power. And they’ll get it with control of the space station. But know this, Victoria. Your father would be so proud of you, of your achievements, and of how far you’ve come. I won’t let the Daleks get near to you. Never again. I swear. We have to get to the portal. Come on!’

The Dalek Supreme and its underlings met with the Dalek that had completed its reconnaissance work.

‘Make way for the Supreme Dalek!’ shouted the leader’s entourage of two black-domed Daleks, donning far superior weaponry than the silver and blue scout. The minion glided aside.

‘What of the aliens?’ boomed the Supreme Dalek, taking centre stage.

‘Three dead, five missing,’ said the scout.

‘Not adequate,’ the Supreme hissed.

The Master stood by the inferior Dalek, taking in the impressive livery of the ‘*Supreme One*’.

‘Bring forward the alien.’

The Master approached and stood before the gold Dalek.

‘Who are you?’

‘I am the Master,’ he said proudly, recognising the same gold Dalek that he’d allied himself with in his previous regeneration. Back then, he was up against the Doctor’s third incarnation and his plucky young assistant, Jo Grant.

‘Believe it or not, we shall be allies in your future, you and I. What’s to stop us from being so again?’

The Dalek Supreme couldn't decide what to make of this assertion.
'How could you have knowledge of the future?'
The Master chuckled at the nature of hindsight.
'It comes with the advantage of being a time traveller. I'm a Time Lord, and a renegade at that!'
The Supreme Dalek was unsure of the sincerity of the Master's intentions.
'And you propose an alliance?'
'I do. Think of the civilisations we could enslave, the worlds we could ravage, the planets we could burn. The mere mention of our names sends shivers down the spines of puny creatures who would surrender unto us. Together, we'd make quite a statement, as the two most feared alien intelligences in the galaxy.'
The Supreme Dalek saw in him the evil it saw in itself.
'Your proposal is agreeable,' it accepted, forming an alliance.
Everything was beginning to fall into place.
'As for the Doctor and his companions,' rasped the Master, 'they must be located and destroyed!'
The Daleks were suddenly worried at the mention of the Time Lord known as *the Doctor*.
'The Doctor is an enemy of the Daleks,' they crowed. 'What is he doing here?'
'Probably to stop me,' answered the Master. 'He's a meddler. But he can't stop us now. The Decimation Ring is ours. Together, we shall be victorious!'
The Supreme Dalek turned to its subordinates.
'Search the ship!' it ordered, in an almost unsatisfied tone. 'Seek out the Doctor and exterminate him!'
The Daleks all rattled with excitement.
'We obey!' they squealed, before setting off on their mission.

'This must be it, Victoria!'
The Doctor suddenly beamed with excitement. A steel door opened from the centre outwards, revealing the control centre they sought.
'It's from here we can literally step onto the planet Forristan.'
He found a control console and began playing with the switches.
'A-ha!' he said.
'What is it?' asked Victoria.
'The re-activation switch. One flick of this and I'll have re-established the

link.'

Cody and Sharna entered from the doorway behind them.

'Doctor!' said Cody. 'We found you! Thank goodness!'

'You're going to Forristan?' enquired Sharna.

'Well, naturally,' revealed the Doctor. 'That's where we'll find Jamie, and the TARDIS too, if our luck's in!'

Cody and Sharna exchanged looks of trepidation. Could they risk their lives by returning to the planet they'd left behind?

'Will you save us?' begged Sharna. 'We don't want to die here.'

The Doctor smiled. 'Of course I will. It's what we came here to do in the first place.'

He hit the reactivation switch. Artificial lights sprang into action, and a bright, shimmering vortex appeared before them.

'And there we have it!' he exclaimed. 'The portal to the world beyond. Are you ready, Victoria?'

'Well, I'm not sure,' she said, reluctantly, 'but if I stay, I'll die, and if I go with you, I'll live, right?'

'I'd like to think so,' said the Doctor goofily. 'It's okay, Victoria. Trust me.'

She did. She always had, ever since they'd met. Ever since she'd first stepped aboard the TARDIS.

'Alright,' she agreed, placing her trust in him once more.

'What about you two?' he said, turning to Cody and Sharna.

'All the way, Doctor,' said Sharna. She gripped Cody's hand, and together they walked towards the blinding light of the opened portal. 'Let's do this!'

The Daleks sent to kill the Doctor were too late.

'The Doctor has fled to the planet Forristan,' divulged one of the Supreme Dalek's minions to its master. 'What are your instructions?'

'The Doctor is of no consequence now.'

The Dalek Supreme turned abruptly away from the observation deck and sided with the Master. 'He is powerless to stop us. Forristan is under Dalek control. We have the most powerful weapon in the universe!'

Victoria staggered forward from the portal onto the charred remains of the planet Forristan. She still believed the Doctor was at her side when she fell to her knees, face down and caked in mud.

‘Doctor?’

‘I’m over here,’ he called, lying on his back and stuck in what appeared to be a pool of sludge. ‘Give us a hand, Victoria.’

Victoria stood up, brushed herself down, thanking her lucky stars she wasn’t as filthy as he was. ‘Coming!’ she yelled, quickly joining the Doctor to help him up.

‘Don’t forget about us!’ yelled Sharna. She’d landed on both legs, whilst Cody wasn’t so lucky. She helped him to his feet.

‘Now to find Jamie,’ said the Doctor, quietly.

‘Why are you whispering?’ asked Cody, ‘there’ll be nobody left alive for us to worry about. The bomb made sure of that!’

‘Don’t be so sure,’ replied the Doctor. ‘I know the Daleks. If they came to this world, knowing it had been made uninhabitable, you can bet your life not all is well.’

That brought all their moods down a notch. Travelling through the portal was one thing, but facing the wrath of the Daleks was quite another.

‘Where do we start?’ shrugged Sharna, as she looked around helplessly. ‘It’ll be like finding a needle in a haystack!’

‘If I can just locate the TARDIS, then I’m sure Jamie won’t be far away!’

They set off at a pace, but a Dalek was watching them. It trundled after them, keeping to the shadows. Most of the plant life that had survived resembled the petrified jungle on Skaro, way back when the Doctor, in a previous incarnation, had visited there. The once fertile ground was reduced to piles of sand and grit and rubble.

‘I don’t wish to alarm you,’ uttered the Doctor, piquing the interests of his friends, ‘but I think we’re...’

‘...being followed?’ presumed Cody.

The Doctor silently nodded. ‘Don’t look round,’ he said cautiously. ‘Keep walking, please. One false move and we’ll be blown apart.’

They hurried along the plains of Forristan, which luckily slowed the Dalek down. It didn’t travel well across the now rubble strewn surface.

‘Over there!’ said the Doctor, pointing out a hillock strewn with wreckage. ‘Keep your head down!’ he added as they clambered behind what had once been a high-rise building.

The Dalek's eyestalk did a full 360 degrees. It had lost them. Giving up, it shuffled on. Once it was out of sight, the Doctor and his friends hurried on in their search of either the TARDIS or Jamie. The way ahead of them was marred by thick smog, but then a figure wandered towards them, in a slightly agitated manner.

'Jamie!' exclaimed Victoria.

'Are you... are you real?' Jamie yelled, as he staggered towards them.

Victoria ran to stop him from falling.

'Very real!' she said, holding him.

'Doctor... what's wrong with him?' she asked.

Jamie was feeling dizzy, his head spinning.

'Here, allow me,' said the Doctor, taking some of Jamie's weight. Both Cody and Sharna lent a hand. 'We have to find the TARDIS,' the Doctor told them. 'Come on.'

Jamie was mumbling something indecipherable about how to find the TARDIS, but thankfully his head soon cleared.

'It's back this way, Doctor.'

The Doctor thanked him and, with his friends' help, heaved him back in the direction he'd come from. They followed Jamie's footprints until their attention was drawn to the familiar sight of the TARDIS.

'Well, am I glad to be home,' said the Doctor, still breathing heavily after they'd all clambered inside the TARDIS with the barely conscious Jamie. 'He will recover now we're aboard. If we'd spent any longer out there, none of us would be alive to tell the tale.'

'And the Daleks?' puffed Victoria, leaning on the console for support.

'Oh, don't worry. They're sealed in a casing for a reason. The rising humidity wouldn't have any effect on them, but we on the other hand...' he paused and saw tears in Victoria's eyes. He set the TARDIS in motion.

Jamie became more settled, benefitting from the temporal grace of the TARDIS.

'I wouldn't like to frighten you. All that matters is we're safe.'

'This place is extraordinary!' beamed Cody, taking in the sheer size of the console room.

'Why, thank you,' said the Doctor.

'I've never seen anything like this before!' shared Sharna.

'No, I don't suppose you have,' replied the Doctor. He stood at the controls. 'So, where to?' he asked them.

‘Can you manage the Serconisphere?’ asked Cody.

‘Of course.’

‘We’d be ever so grateful,’ said Sharna.

‘Hold on tight!’ said the Doctor.

The Master stood on the observation deck aboard the space station. He smiled as he looked out over the many thousands of planets in the Asindon Galaxy.

‘Which of you shall I destroy first?’ he said out loud.

His Dalek allies glided into the room.

‘Space station operating at maximum efficiency,’ thundered the Supreme Dalek.

‘Excellent,’ congratulated the Master. ‘Truly excellent. Except for one minor detail. From here on in, it shall be known as the *Decimation Ring*, and together, we shall *decimate* the universe!’

After the departure of Cody and Sharna on the Serconisphere, the Doctor had put the TARDIS on a steady course. As it drifted through space, he and Victoria discussed their most recent adventure, whilst Jamie regained his strength.

‘Is there really nothing else we can do to stop the Master?’

‘I only wish there was,’ the Doctor told her. ‘But he holds all the aces! He can’t be stopped. At least, not by us. With the Daleks on side, and the Decimation Ring at his disposal, he has power over all. If he chose to, he could wipe out the universe!’

‘He would go that far?’ she gasped.

‘I think he’d go further,’ he answered. ‘It’s going to take something extraordinary to stop him! And I wouldn’t like to say what, for I’m afraid the universe would never fully recover from such a disastrous occurrence.’

He tapped his fingers against the console as he leaned against it, gently.

‘The Master and the Daleks have won, Victoria. Just like that. I rather fear for the total extermination of all life in the universe!’

The Slaves of Missy

Gary J. Mack

The Prorex Imperial Authority throne room was a large void of white shining stone. Little heat ever remained within its walls, and the cloying smell of perfumed braziers meant every breath was a struggle.

The Patrona of Prorex was bored. She shuffled on her cold slab-like throne, becoming more irritated by the second. If only she had her device, if only she could kill.

The monkeys and the insects were arguing about the latest cost-demand ratio of slaves to the metric kilo of the smart opiate Phun. It had been a neat little deal at first, get the monkey planet Prorex hooked on Phun, then increase the cost per kilo until the only way they could pay for it was with their children. Then the slightly strange insectoid ZZzipartek would have a welcome supply of slaves to do their bidding in return. With her magnificent deal, she launched a bid to be Patrona and won, backed by the cartels. Such fun. All at the cost of just a few hundred thousand monkeys. Stupid monkeys.

‘Stop talking. My ears hurt.’ The Patrona cut through the babble like a sharpened blade might part the flesh of a young maiden’s throat.

Audible Crune, her lanky white-haired Prime Minister turned and almost made the mistake of frowning. *Just you try it mister*, the Patrona thought. Audible went pale at the thought of what he might have done, and what the resultant action might have been. The reintroduction of capital punishment had helped the Patrona to further subdue the monkeys, so they lived in fear of a single glance. They thought she was one of them. You could rise quickly in this bureaucratic society; everyone’s past was rumour and shadow. She had appeared out of the blue, and in a year she was this planet’s leader and had got them hooked on Phun. Poor apes, she would never be like them. On the outside maybe, but on the inside, she was a whole lotta different.

The Patrona turned to the insectoid leaders of ZZzipartek. ‘Three slaves per

kilo, no more. No children this time. They are not well enough to work when they get to your hives, and they die because you have not fed them, and we will not haggle just because you have killed them before they reach your home. YOU NEED TO FEED YOUR SLAVES MORE.’ She giggled a little after her screaming, then she mellowed her tones. ‘Apologies, I am a little excitable today.’ She didn’t want to spark an interspecies conflict – well not just yet.

The Patrona turned to Crune and said ‘Find more adolescent addicts, and then the ZZzipartek will accept them as payment. Until then we will only send our fittest and nourished mon... people.’ Whoops she nearly called them monkeys again. Silly lady.

The Patrona was glad to eventually get out of the throne room. She just stood and left them. The ZZzipartek buzzed in annoyance every time she did this. Coralex, her personal slave, followed behind. He was a hulking young man who was more strategically shaved bear than monkey. He was her protection, silently attentive, devoid of tongue and ear drums as was the tradition for the honour guard on this barbaric world. *Secrets and lies were the major currencies here.*

‘Well, that was dull,’ she sang as she traversed the pathway back to her personal rooms. ‘Dull, dull, dull. Your people give in so easily, Corey my love. If ever they knew that Phun was just a cleverly refined smart-sugar from the hugadoo weed that they could make themselves.’

The Patrona reached her apartments and Coralex opened the heavy double doors for her. Her house slave had the rooms smelling of citrus again. The Patrona hated oranges and lemons in her current incarnation. She would have the girl whipped. Only purple fruit for the Patrona. *Plums or blackberries.*

The Patrona went and freshened up, changed out of her state robes and into her favourite accoutrements. A bitter observer from late twentieth century Earth might comment that she looked like the love child of Mary Poppins and the Wicked Witch of the West.

Missy, aka the Patrona, had a certain style about her, and didn’t she know it as she twirled at herself in a large, bejewelled mirror. Momentarily, she was in an exceptionally good mood. It didn’t last long. Barely two Prorex-time gaps later, she heard *that* sound, distant but unmistakeable. The elephant in a marching

band sound. The walls of time ripping apart. Then the silence as they repaired.

Is it him? Has he come to foil my little scheme? She hoped he was one of the Scottish ones this time. They both liked a scheme.

‘Incognito,’ Perpugilliam Brown squeaked at the Time Lord known only as the Doctor. She laughed; he wasn’t getting it.

‘I will be bearing a perception filter, Peri.’

How did he make her four letter name sound so full of syllables?

‘I’m not sure all the perception filters in all the world could blank out your colours. You look like an explosion...’

‘...in a paint factory. Redundant repugnant repetitiveness, my dear Peri,’ the Doctor said with a tongue rolled as tight as a Havana cigar.

‘How about the blue suit you wore to Queen Victoria’s coronation, Doctor? From what the Tardis databanks have told us about Prorex, they are sober in their dress. Like the Victorians.’

The sound of the TARDIS landing, like heavy weights clunking on a gym floor, split their conversation.

‘We are here,’ Peri said. She did it to annoy him – baiting this Doctor was fun.

‘Obviously, Miss Brown.’ He paused and looked at her with a smile backed up with chins as he realised her tease. ‘Blue suit it is. But you will need a change of clothing too. Your leotard is a little revealing for these reticent societies.’

‘I already have my dress chosen. I will go and change.’

‘Mmm.’

And he was away with the fairies again. Muttering about the Master probably being there on Prorex – God forbid – and about time differentials and having to have the perception filter ramped up to prevent a time short-out thingy before he had a chance to solve the problem. At least he was reaching for the blue suit as he chuntered. She needed to be out of there before he dropped his trousers.

Peri made her way back to her room and decided to take a quick shower, it would be rude not to after the plumbed-in cubicle had appeared that morning, something to do with the telepathic circuits knowing she would prefer to wash there rather than in the shower next to the swimming pool. Blah blah.

Peri eventually reached the control room resplendent in a sober dark blue gown and coat. The Doctor was standing there in the calm blue version of his horrible ensemble. He'd even managed to get a quick haircut. Was there a barber's on the TARDIS or had he popped out somewhen to have a bouffant?

'You took your time, Peri,' he said, and she knew he would. 'I was ready last week. I've already had a scout around. I think we may be here a while. There is something not quite right and I am determined to get to the bottom of it.'

'You have a woman in charge?' The ZZzipartek leader grinned at Missy but was talking to Crune. Crune looked like he wanted to die there and then.

The ZZzipartek had removed their negotiation armour and by initial appearance they looked almost humanoid. Their bodies were bipedal, but their heads, wings, and forearms were insectoid. One multifaceted eye dominated their coal black faces. Their under-armour was bottle green, making them look like earth flies. The leader Zzink buzzed about impatiently – it needed swatting.

'If you want a further trade deal Zzinky, you *will* talk to me,' Missy commanded, sounding bored. Her retinue knew how dangerous she was when bored. She raised her umbrella and all the courtiers in the room, except for Zzink

and his guards, flinched. They had only recently seen a slave turned to mush by the sonic wave emitter at its tip.

‘How many slaves have you got? We have one hundred kilos of Phun ready. We want three hundred thousand slaves, sooner rather than later, or we turn this planet to dust,’ he buzzed.

Missy imagined a giant neon tube attracting him and zapping him.

‘And that is just down payment to secure the deal. I have another one million kilos in preparation,’ Zzink added. He moved about in darting motions. It was quite fascinating really. She might have to dissect a drone at some point – for fun.

‘You are a one, Zzinky.’ She gave him her most rehearsed red lipped smile – at least she presumed he was he; he might be she, a ze, or a hive mind. ‘Bring your ships, your hive, whatever you want to call it, but if you lay one finger on my planet, you will wish you had never been hatched. Fifty thousand slaves a month for the next six Prorexia Major months. No more. They don’t grow on trees you know, not like your pupae do. Then we can talk about the other million.’

Missy knew she would be long gone by then. Most likely the ZZzipartek too.

Zzink put his head on one side like an attentive puppy. There was a pause. Had she overdone it? Maybe she had. Then he laughed, and it sounded like a sibilant kazoo. ‘You are funny. You would never be allowed on my hive ship. But you are funny.’

She had still got it.

Peri had been on Prorex Major for six weeks. Six weeks. What was the Doctor doing? She rarely saw him and when she did, he was restless and mumbling about ‘you know who’ and ‘his loftiness’ as if she should know who he meant. If

only he explained stuff. Explanations would probably solve half the problems they encountered.

Peri had found herself a little charitable role in a soup kitchen. She was allegedly the Doctor's young wife Peri Smythe and she was – according to the patronising Doctor – playing the part well. Prorexian society was very Victorian in nature and it was also very caste based. The lows, as they were called, were the members of Prorexian society who held no role at all, they were not allowed to work except as house slaves if they were lucky.

The murky underbelly of Prorex Major City was riddled with brothels and illegal drug houses. Phun addiction was rife amongst all castes – but was particularly a problem amongst the highs.

Walentia Schizz was Peri and the Doctor's hostess. She was a wonderful woman, a philanthrope of the best kind. Her soup kitchen was legendary amongst the lower castes, and her rehabilitation programme had helped many a citizen to recover from their dependency. The Doctor and Peri had met her at a Parliament 'do' in the first week of their stay. Walentia had offered them board and lodging until the Doctor's first parliamentary pay packet arrived.

Peri had been serving food night after night and was exhausted.

'That's it, dear, I think we are done,' said Walentia. 'How about I walk you home and we partake of a sherry once we are safely indoors. There will be too many lows and level ones about after dark. They might even risk summary execution for our purses. The poor things'

Walentia was a voluptuous widow who clearly wanted to find the right gentleman to settle down with. Peri had seen many gentlemen try to court Walentia in recent weeks, it seemed she set her standards high. Walentia did seem to have a *thing* for the Doctor, however.

Peri was sure the Doctor had dug deep into his usually non-existent flirtatious Time Lord nature to take advantage of Walentia's kindness, securing a role for Peri as her companion, as well as a place for them both to stay.

It had taken the Doctor three weeks to get elected to the lower parliament, only

because the representatives didn't seem to last that long. There were always vacancies in the supposed democratic race to upper parliament. However, from what Peri had seen of the Patrona, no wonder her opposition didn't last long. She was a grade A witch. Peri had asked the Doctor why the Patrona sounded Scottish and his tart response was 'all planets have a north.'

'Madam Walentia. Help,' whimpered a voice. It was male and coming from the shadowy backdrop of the large community hall. Most of the patrons were shuffling off to their beds. Probably in shop doorways or under bridges.

'Raydock. Is that you my boy?'

A tall young man staggered from those shadows. His clothes were torn and ragged and he looked terrible. He was a beautiful boy if you looked carefully, dark brown skin, light green eyes.

'Where have you been?' Walentia said. She turned to Peri. 'Time to clear the hall and lock the doors, dear.'

There were a few mumbles and grumbles from the stragglers as Peri ushered them out, but they knew it was well past time. The warm hall was a preferable place to be though, the nights were beginning to get cold as the first sub-winter approached. The movement of the two weak Prorexian suns caused strange seasons. Only when they were both shining proudly in the sky did Prorexia have any heat about it.

When Peri returned to Walentia and Raydock, it seemed the boy had passed out.

'Get me some water dear, he is dehydrated,' Walentia said in a firm voice. 'We need to get him back to my house for a few days of meals and rest. He's going cold turkey and not dealing with it very well.' She was always at her best when she had a young person to care for.

Peri knew the next few hours would be busy, and it was unlikely she would get any sleep.

‘We need to drive out the dependency on Phun from this society. The young and the vulnerable are preyed upon by those who ply their trade from other’s miseries. I say to you, Madam Patrona, that you are bankrupting this world – the slave trade is robbing us of our future. Only the cartels profit. I am sure of it.’

The Doctor listened to the brave opposition politician, soon to be martyr, who was challenging the woman called the Patrona. The purple robed woman was like many despots he had met and vanquished. Evil to the core. The smirk on that dratted woman’s face betrayed her intentions to kill this poor soul or more likely get the cartels to do it.

Could she really be the Master? Her behaviour was certainly as maniacal as his old frenemy. It was also not uncommon for his people to change their outward sex. They were all based on the Matrix primogeniture stamps of the ancient Gallifreyans who were originally a binary society during the dark times.

The TARDIS *had* seemed terribly upset, whistling, and burbling when he’d inputted the coordinates. It seemed she was indicating the presence of a time disruption on Prorexia that needed to be solved, yet she was reticent to go. Had she detected another TARDIS? Or a Time Lord from an alternative time zone perhaps? He rarely met his nemesis out of order and when he did the time differential tended to short out, with either one of them gaining a few centuries in a short space of time but then subsequently having no memories of the encounter.

He hoped the perception filter was holding. He knew if this were a future incarnation of the Master, she would know him blue suit and all. If only he could lay his hands on the chameleon arch manual. Becoming human was a little drastic, but if the Master was involved...

He would have to get closer. The Patrona was due to host a charitable ball in the coming days. He would make sure he had an invite.

‘Well, Patrona?’ The young politician shouted, bringing the Doctor back to the present with a jolt. ‘Are you going to answer me? I’m unlikely to last the night, so I may as well demand an answer.’

The Patrona pointed her umbrella at the young politician. The Doctor noticed how firmly he was standing, the brave lad.

‘Chesil Darl. Isn’t it? Eldest son of the last leader of the opposition?’

The young man nodded in affirmation.

‘I don’t kill people for their views. Why would I? I only kill people if they are a danger to my honourable friends in this chamber. It is my democratic right to defend myself and my colleagues. Your father was plotting my death, he was carrying high explosives—’

‘That is a lie,’ Darl screamed, suddenly losing his taut composure.

‘Albeit very badly constructed explosives, and with that loud voice of his, anyone within in a mile of him who had their windows open knew of his treachery. I’m surprised he didn’t set the bomb off with his gabbling gob. My sonic device merely triggered his bomb. Your father killed himself. You see, I don’t kill people. Listen to me. I do *not* kill people without a reason.’

The Doctor was almost certain she was about to add ‘you ninny.’ This *had to be* the Master. The opposition party would need a new leader after this evening. Luckily, he had been lobbying his colleagues. Whatever happened to Darl, the Doctor knew he would be installed as the new Leader of the opposition by the morning.

The Darl monkey had a measure about him that had made Missy think he could be the Doctor. She’d heard the wheezing groaning sound weeks ago and had been searching for *him* ever since. It could hardly be anyone else, the others

were all meant to be dead. Gallifrey had fallen, depending on who you asked or where you looked. Yet she had heard time engines ripping reality apart. Her spies had identified a handful of enigmatic men of all ages, but none had regenerated during the torture sessions. Each death was another disappointment, but none more so than Darl the younger. He had lasted a long time, until he just died.

It was frustrating. If the Time Lord was another woman, the Rani for example, goddess forbid, she was hiding well. If it was the Doctor, then he would no doubt reveal himself very soon. He had a habit of doing so.

The time vortex manipulator that had brought Missy here had malfunctioned and she couldn't be sure if she were currently following her own timeline or that of one of her other selves. So it might be a Doctor she knew, or it might not; it might be pre the Time War or post it. If he was using a perception filter or the chameleon arch, then things would be a lot more difficult.

Tonight, she was throwing the charitable ball – ironically – in aid of the Phun addicts she had spent the last year creating.

Missy was sat atop a dais, in the Prorexian state ballroom. The monkeys had decorated it in burgundy and plum tones. It did look nice, she thought begrudgingly. She watched as everyone who was anyone from the upper tier arrived, flanked by a few of the lower placed politicians and a handful of immersion celebrities and strategically picked journalists.

The blue suited new leader of the opposition, Johann Smythe, with a girl in a blue dress beside him, sidled up to the dais. Missy patiently watched him greet the myriad of fawning politicians. He was obviously a pompous ass, she noted. There he was, waving his arms about the chambers, using alliteration as if it was being written out of reality. His frockcoat, although blue, was made up of all sorts of patterns – so terribly gauche and vulgar. He had short curly ash blond hair and a face that was very bland. She looked into his eyes as he approached her for the customary introductions. Still not the Doctor. None of the Doctor's incarnations would be this unremarkable. The girl – his wife allegedly – was also unremarkable, a dour black bob with a nose that looked like she had run into a glass door.

‘Madam President.’ Smythe prostrated himself, a little too elaborate than needed. He was having an early pop at her, no doubt. He would be dead soon. She had already spoken to the Longuin Cartel. The girl curtsied awkwardly, like she was unable to bend at all.

‘A new leader of the opposition. Where is your predecessor? I expected him to be here tonight. You change leadership like a pair of day-old underpants.’

‘Madam President is amusing. No doubt young Mr Darl’s corpse is floating away from your offices via the sewers as we speak.’

‘Leader of the opposition, tut tut, you tarnish me with such cruel words. Such vulgarity in front of your dear wifeling. Her name is?’

‘Madam, as assured as my demise at your hands will be, I refuse to back down like some pitiful pawn of prophecy. This is Peridot Smythe, my new bride.’

Missy gave out a long ‘oh,’ that rose in pitch. ‘You are a brave one. I’m going to have fun with you. I may have to gut your little princess too,’ she added under her breath. Coralex who was stood behind her growled, he was so good at feeling the mood.

‘As I will with you and your faux Scottish accent.’

That stopped her. What did this man know of Scotland? What did this man know of her deliberate adoption of the brogue to mirror the last Doctor she had encountered? Was this unremarkable blue-suited man really him? Come to think of it his wife’s hair... it looked like an earth style.

Missy soon forgot her entire exchange with Smythe that evening. She’d heard the kazoo-like laugh of Zzink and decided the alien would be far more interesting to talk to.

Drat, the Doctor thought dialling up the perception filter. Why did he have to mention her Scottish accent? Fool. Thankfully, he had now set the filter so high he was almost invisible.

‘You made reference to her scotch accent, Doctor.’ Speaking the obvious was Peri’s finest skill.

‘Scottish Peri. Scottish. Scotch is a drink. And I know what I did. Foolish – foolish me. I think, however, she might have forgotten our little exchange.’

‘Is that really the Master? A woman? Can *you* change into a woman, Doctor?’ Peri hissed as they sidled to the edge of the room near the balconies. The Doctor stopped at the buffet and pulled a plate from the stack and began piling it up with food.

‘Doctor, you aren’t answering me.’

‘Peri, my dear. Shush. I cannot use the perception filter retrospectively, so if any of *her* lackeys overhear you, then we are done for. The time differential cannot short out before I have saved this world. I need to know the real reason why that ZZzipartek is here. They do not normally leave people alive after they have got what they want.’ He shoved a large sausage roll into his mouth, and Peri shook her head. She was always judging him around food.

His Time Lord physiognomy would deal with his increase in calories, and of course he would not put on weight despite her ministrations.

The gathering was not a friendly one, so Peri had decided to go back to help Walentia at the kitchen. She arrived in the middle of a kerfuffle.

Peri stepped out of the carriage to be greeted by Walentia screaming at two of the district militia. They were dressed all in black, the lightning strikes of their badges of office reflecting the half-light. Between them they were holding up a

woozy looking Raydock.

‘You cannot take him. He is not using,’ Walentia cried.

‘What is going on,’ Peri shouted. ‘I am the wife of the leader of the opposition and I demand to know what is happening, what are you doing to this poor man?’ Peri was running, holding her skirts above the flowing water from the earlier downpour. The struggle was happening outside the entrance of the community hall, where some of Walentia’s other clients were watching on with a mixture of understanding and sorrow on their faces.

‘This man has used again, and he has broken his bond. He has therefore offered himself up for slavery,’ growled one of the militia thugs. He was older and more vicious looking than his younger non-descript colleague.

‘What do you mean? Raydock has been clean for a while!’ Peri shouted as she reached them. She looked at Raydock, but he wouldn’t catch her eye.

‘We caught him buying Phun. We tracked him back here and watched him take it. He has broken his bond. He will now be taken for processing.’ The other heavy was almost robotic in tone, as if he were reading from the training manual.

A militia carriage slowly drew up to them and the militia bundled Raydock inside. He would not look at Peri. The door closed and the carriage trundled away across the cobbles.

Peri turned to Walentia. ‘Where will they take him?’

‘To the processing unit. Then onto one of the slavers ships, no doubt bound for the ZZzipartek Hive System.’

‘Did you know he was using again.’

‘No, he took some of the charitable proceeds to buy his fix earlier. I didn’t think he would rob me. It’s part of the problem, they always need to get their fix. Phun is so addictive. What a silly boy. I could have helped him.’ Walentia had tears in her eyes.

‘Where is the processing unit?’ Peri asked Walentia quietly, aware that some

of the militia had stayed behind. No doubt, they were looking for other fit and able young people to press into slavery.

‘At the municipal buildings site next to the Patrona’s palace. But you cannot go there.’

Without waiting for anything further to be said, Peri walked back to her own carriage and asked for the driver to take her on to the Municipal Square where the party was probably in full swing by now.

The Doctor had bought the perception filter on Navenn Naqua during his last but one incarnation. The lovely Sarah Jane had pinched it to play hide and seek with Harry in the TARDIS. Of course, he had been so bombastic back then he never bothered with disguises. He would blithely walk into a situation, all jelly babies blazing.

The Doctor felt he was becoming a little more secretive and circumspect these days. No doubt his next incarnation would be all theories and schemes, he could feel it in his hearts.

The perception filter had been dialled right up, no one would notice him at all unless he literally bumped into them. Even then, the technology was so good they would think nothing had happened or would meekly accept the pre-programmed apologies one could set within its operating parameters.

He had noticed that the Patrona, aka the Master, had taken the ZZzipartek leader into one of the side rooms. It was open plan, so he had no problems sneaking in. The Patrona was no longer there but the ZZzipartek Leader was talking to a subordinate.

‘You do realise the amount of universal laws you are breaking by dealing in human slaves?’ The Doctor dialled down his perception filter, the software would have helped the ZZzipartek to realise he had been there all along.

Both the insectoids started to dance about, however. They were nervous. No doubt scheming. One reached for its disruptor. 'Why is the Leader of the Opposition at this meeting? The Patrona did not say you were attending.'

'Well,' the Doctor said. He ignored the pointed weapon and took a seat, putting his feet up on the table whilst folding his arms. 'I do not have to have an invite. This is a civic building, and I can go where I like. Moreover, I have been in touch with the Shadow Architect to inform him of your trade in Phun and human slaves. They will be approaching with a squad of Judoon as we speak.'

The ZZzipartek leader stood and hissed, his side antennae poking out in their translation of annoyance.

'Tell me why I should not kill you when the Patrona regularly kills her opponents,' it buzzed.

'Interesting reveal. The Shadow Proclamation would be interested to know the Patrona is a despot.' The Doctor had no idea if the ancient organisation were still policing the universe, it had been such a long time since he'd last heard of them. Indeed, he hadn't spoken with the Architect for hundreds of years, not since its original inception.

'Missy will not let you live,' the other ZZzipartek whizzed. His leader stopped quite still, then backhanded the subordinate insectoid brutally. 'I will deal with you later FZin.' FZin was out cold, however.

'Missy? Interesting...' the Doctor murmured under his breath.

The ZZzipartek leader eventually dragged Fzin to its feet and pulled him out of the room without further word to the Doctor.

The Doctor dialled up the perception filter again and went in search of Missy. The ZZzipartek drone had given it away, the Master was no doubt milking the gender change. His old friend had always been male in appearance since he had known him. Things were adding up now though. The Master always rose to the top of the pile and was as scheming as ever.

He found Missy sitting in her throne room talking to someone via a sub space-time visualiser. Probably to the ZZzipartek Hive System. The Doctor's occluded

approach meant he couldn't quite see the person on the screen.

'I think everything is ready and the plan has succeeded. The slaves have been accounted for your end and I have the supply of Phun.'

Missy was on her own, sitting resplendent in purple, twirling her umbrella.

The large screen was blank, and the voice was disguised. Missy had no doubt taken steps to encrypt it. *What was she up to?*

It was time to confront her. The Doctor shuffled out of the shadows, but suddenly a part of the shadow detached from the back of the dais and before he knew it, he was hit with an almighty blow. The white room turned black as the Doctor fell unconscious.

Peri had managed to follow Raydock and his captors into the processing unit and had watched them talk about taking him to a holding cell. Security was lax it seemed, so she was eventually able to find her way to where Raydock was being held.

'Raydock.' She whispered.

It was a row of cells housing a sorry group of individuals. Aside from Raydock there were three men, one woman, and a teenage boy, all who looked like they were near catatonic with shock and malnutrition due to their ordeal.

'Peridot. Why are you here? I broke my bond, my freedom is forfeit,' whispered Raydock. His handsome features pulled at Peri's emotions.

'Where I come from, although we don't really help people with addiction, we don't send them into slavery, it's barbaric. My husband said the Patrona is fuelling the slave trade by forcing people into addiction knowing they will break their bonds. You have fallen into their trap, but I am going to get you out.'

‘Peridot. They will capture you too. The Patrona will kill your husband, and they will take you into custody. You will become a slave too. Flee, before it is too late. It’s far too late for me. I will be a hive slave to those dreaded insects picking up their poisonous detritus. I’ll be dead in months. Or, if I’m lucky, I’ll be sold on to another less barbaric race.’

Suddenly, Peri heard one or more of the big fly like creatures. They really did sound like kazoos. Two of the drones entered the cells with one of the militia wardens that had caught Raydock.

‘Line the slaves up for immediate transport to the ZZzipartek ship. We will transfer them to the hive ship in orbit,’ one of the drones whizzed, its husky tones like leaves crunching underfoot in a graveyard.

Peri, your imagination is not so useful at times, she berated herself. She would be in their line of sight before long, and there really wasn’t anywhere to hide was there? She moved over to a guard desk that was situated in the darker end of the cells. She was able to get underneath. Somewhat fortuitously, it was covered in a cloth that draped almost to the ground.

Peri watched as they led the slaves out. Raydock was silent, most of the others so in shock they hadn’t registered what was happening, as they were led one by one to indenture. She heard the door close after the last of the slaves was led away. Only then was she brave enough to make her way out.

The lamps had been extinguished in the cell, so what little light there had been had gone. Peri made her way slowly to the door and tried the handle. Thankfully, it was open. She turned it with all the stealth and slowness her nerves could muster and walked back out into the Municipal Courtyard. She ran as fast as she could to try and get back to the carriage that was parked on the road adjacent to the southern quadrant of the yard.

Suddenly there was a human shout. ‘Oy, what are you doing here – this area is under cordon.’

‘But not a very good one,’ Peri mumbled. Changing direction, she sped towards her carriage. Her driver would no doubt be getting impatient. He had not been happy about her multiple destinations that evening. She wondered if she

even had enough Prorexian shekels in her purse to pay him.

Another shout cut her short. There was a man ahead of her, another militia man standing just beyond a freestanding frame that led to a well-lit tunnel, like the concertinaed approach to a plane. Peri had no other route left but down through that tunnel. She would probably be trapped, but just maybe it would lead to a better hiding place or alternative exit.

Summoning all her courage Peri entered the tunnel, but sensing her hair standing up on its end, she quickly realised it wasn't a tunnel at all. She knew exactly what it felt like to travel through a portal.

'Rise and shine sleepy head.' The Scottish tones were sing-songy, if that was the right conjugation for anything coming out of the Master's mouth.

Still worried about verbs, even when you are in a total fix, Doctor.

The reassuring hum of the console room was comforting, it filled the Doctor's hearts with that sense of home that Gallifrey could never give him.

'Your symbiotic link was rubbish. It only took a day to hack it.'

Missy was sitting in an old wicker chair filing her nails, resplendent in her plum outfit, umbrella propped up against its side.

'Why are we in my TARDIS?'

Missy ignored him. 'I remember you. The fat one with the horrible clothes.'

'I am sure 'Missy' that had we met; I would know. You are therefore most likely from my future. I have to remind you not to transgress any further.'

'When I am finished and ready, I will trigger the time differential by leaving

this timeline. My vortex manipulator is ready. We will not remember this encounter. Like so many we have probably had up and down each other's timelines.'

The Doctor tried to stand but realised he was tied to another chair.

'What have you done with Peri?'

'I haven't done anything with your latest monkey-girl doctor. Although one day you will take your eye off the ball and will get her killed. There, a little snippet of your future. Free. Gratis.' Missy stood and did a little dance around the console room as he raged for a few moments, stating every sub-clause of the laws of time Missy had broken.

Missy activated the scanner screen with one deft flick of the appropriate control. The screen opened and the image of a ZZzipartek hive ship appeared.

Hive ships were massive vessels built within the carcass of a queen. Queens usually grew in orbit, casting their eggs to the surface of a planet with programmed DNA written into their nutrients, giving the larvae then hatchlings the knowledge to build their ships, develop their technology, and to transform their mother's corpse into a space faring vessel.

The Doctor had been on one before, in his dim and distant past. It had not ended well for the ZZzipartek Hive.

'Zzinky.' Missy said in mock delight. 'May your store of faecal matter be resplendent in its nourishment.'

The kazoo sound of Zzink's laughter could not disguise his angry countenance. Missy had wronged this one. The Doctor could tell.

'You are Time Lord Patrona. Therefore manipulative. Were you ever going to send me the rest of the slaves?'

Missy laughed manically, bordering on mad, the Doctor thought.

'Yes, I was going to hold up my end of the bargain. No doubt you have taken them anyway. Unfortunately, he arrived.' She thumbed at the Doctor.

‘He is another Time Lord.’

‘Well done, how did you guess?’

‘We interrogated his human friend. He is the Dok-tor. An enemy of the ZZzipartek. You are in league to bring us down? And you send a female spy into our midst? Without permission, you defile our queen.’

‘What about the female slaves you have had?’ The Doctor asked. Missy looked at him shook her head and drew the executioners line across her own neck.

‘We kill them. No female defiles our queen’s body. Now we will destroy this system. Hive ensign, fire on the Prorexian planets.’

‘No!’ the Doctor screamed. He had been working on his bonds throughout the exchange, and now he had broken free. Quickly, he stood up, ran to the console and switched on the dematerialisation circuit, locking on to the ZZzipartek vessel. He had one chance. He materialised around the ZZzipartek ship, compartmentalising it.

He looked on the scanner screen as Prorex and its sister planet Prorex II were vaporised by the hive planet buster.

The twin suns imploded.

He had been too late this time.

So very late.

‘Sometimes Doctor, you cannot save the planet or the girl. No doubt they will be executing Little Miss Voluptuous this very moment. I set up a situation that led Peri onto that slave ship once I had worked out who she really was. I sent a message to say she was working for me. I knew once they had a foothold they wouldn’t wait for the slaves. They robbed that world of millions of its people. In minutes. You must know how ruthless the Zzipartek are, and how much they hate females on their ships.’

The Doctor worked at the controls as Missy laughed, mocking how distraught he was at the thought of the sheer number of lives lost on those planets. He

located Peri and materialised around her. She looked well, if a little undressed. Her clothes had obviously been torn away prior to her interrogation. He hoped she had not been harmed mentally or physically. The Master would pay for this. He would unravel her schemes. He took off his coat and wrapped it around his companion.

Then he heard a zap, like the sound of a vortex manipulator. He looked over but Missy was gone. Soon after, so too were any memories of her. All that remained was the guilt of five billion lost souls who had died that day and the pain his young companion had been through in his failed plan to take down the Patrona, whoever she was.

The TARDIS screamed, expunged the ZZzipartek hive ship and left that place to forget.

Missy skipped down the corridor of the ship. Not a TARDIS nor a ZZzipartek hive, but an Ustbakan ranger.

The tall bio-mechanoid creature that approached her was intriguing. She had never met Rhett, having until now only ever conversed with him via a space-time link. He was a splendid mix of life and technology.

Although Missy knew she had just come out of the back end of a confrontation with the Doctor, she couldn't for the life of her remember which one. No matter, this was the culmination of a plan she had set in motion a long time ago.

Rhett stopped in front of her. He breathed, whirred, and clicked in the massive cathedral-like corridors, all mock stone and tempered stained glass.

'The Ustbakan collective praises you, Time Lord. You cleared the binary system of Prorexia for us. The solar magnetic effects that neighbouring system has had on ours for millennia is now nullified. No more will we have to move out of the system to breed. What is your desire for payment?'

Missy thought for a moment. She had come out on top. When she was in this sort of situation, she always liked to make sure things were tidy.

‘I want you to destroy the ZZzipartek for me. Whilst you could not act against a human colony like Prorex, you have no such alliances with the Hive Worlds. Destroy them totally.’

‘And that will discharge our debt.’

Missy smiled. ‘Of course.’ She said, all the while thinking *‘Silly billy, you are never free from a debt to Missy.’*

Peacemaker

Paul Hiscock

A Draconian cargo transport glided gracefully through space, on its way to deliver supplies to one of the outer colonies. The ship was nearing the end of its journey when an alert sounded on the flight deck.

‘It is the proximity alarm,’ the pilot informed his captain. ‘A ship is approaching us.’

‘What is its heading?’

‘It appears to be approaching from the direction of the frontier. I am magnifying an image of it now.’

A heavily armoured grey ship appeared on the monitor. Its hull was scored with carbon marks, souvenirs from battles it had fought in the past.

The captain frowned and stroked his long beard thoughtfully. ‘I do not recognise that ship. It is certainly not a Draconian vessel.’

‘Captain, we are receiving a transmission.’

‘Put it on screen.’

An image of a pink skinned human appeared. ‘Halt your vessel immediately, and prepare to be boarded.’

‘This is Draconian space,’ replied the captain. ‘You will turn around and return to the frontier, or face the consequences.’

‘What consequences? There’s nobody else around and you don’t have any weapons, unlike us.’ The human raised her hand and signalled to someone off-screen. A moment later a rocket-missile was fired, just missing the Draconian ship.

‘That was a warning shot,’ the human said. ‘Do you need another demonstration, or are you going to give in now?’

The Draconian captain cut off the transmission.

‘What are we going to do?’ asked his pilot. ‘We cannot fight them.’

‘We must get a message to Draconia. They need to be warned about this incursion.’

As the pilot opened a channel, they heard the clanging of metal against the hull of their ship.

‘This is Draconian cargo transport D-189,’ said the captain. ‘We are being attacked by an Earth warship. They intercepted us as we were on our final approach to Floria. Repeat, we are being attacked by an Earth warship within

Draconian space. They have fired upon our ship and are now boarding us.'

'They have cut through the airlock,' shouted the pilot.

The captain grabbed two pistols from the weapons locker and passed one to the pilot.

'Our lives in the service of the Empire,' he said.

'In the service of the Empire,' the pilot echoed nervously.

The Emperor of Draconia hissed as the transmission was cut off. 'Is there any more?' he asked.

'No, your imperial majesty,' replied the courtier who had delivered the message. 'That was their last broadcast. By the time our forces arrived there was nothing but debris to be found.'

The Emperor turned to a man who stood at the bottom of the steps to the left of the throne. Although he wore the robes of a Draconian noble, he was not of that race. Instead, he was human in appearance with a short black beard with white streaks in it and dark hair in a widow's peak.

'You heard them, Counsellor Master. Can there be any doubt now? It is the Earthmen that are responsible for the attacks on our subjects.'

The Master stared at the vid-screen and nodded slowly. 'It would seem to be the case, your imperial majesty. However, I would not have expected such a bold move.'

'Have you not brought us reports of increasingly frequent incursions across the frontier in space? They breach the treaty with impunity. Honour means nothing to them.'

'This is a grave escalation beyond the testing of your borders, your imperial majesty. General Williams is aggressive, to be sure, but he is not stupid. He would know that an attack like this would leave your two empires on the brink of war. Yet all my sources tell me that the Earthmen have nowhere near the military strength to win such a conflict.'

A younger Draconian, standing to the other side of the throne, addressed the Emperor. 'If we are stronger, why do we not wipe them out immediately, father? Let me lead our battle fleet to crush them.'

'Sadly your fleet is not yet strong enough to prevail decisively either,' replied the Master.

'Our fleet is the mightiest force in this galaxy,' the Prince said. 'Father, surely

you will not let this cowardly outsider dictate our response.'

'You forget your place,' said the Emperor. 'You will address me in the proper manner.'

'Your pardon, my Emperor.' The Prince climbed the steps and kissed his father's hand. 'My life at your command.'

'The Master is a noble of Draconia and has served the Empire well for hundreds of years. You would do well to heed his counsel.'

The Prince stared at the Master's smooth pink skin, with not a scale in sight. He looked so much like their enemies, yet the Prince knew the Master was not an Earthman. He had been an advisor to the previous Emperor when the Prince was just a child, and had not aged a day in all that time. Nevertheless, it was wrong that the Emperor deferred to an alien.

'One day you will succeed me,' the Emperor continued, 'and then you will appreciate the benefits of a different perspective.'

'I thank you for your faith, your imperial majesty,' said the Master. 'However, your son is right to challenge me. I must admit that I do not fully comprehend the actions of the Earthmen. I would suggest that you summon their Ambassador and hear how he justifies this unprovoked attack, before you launch any act of retaliation.'

'Very well. Bring him before me.'

The Master bowed and kissed the Emperor's hand. 'My life at your command.'

The Master seethed as he strode through the corridors of the palace. For years he had fostered this cold war between Earth and Draconia, sharing just enough information with each side to ensure a carefully balanced threat of mutually assured destruction. Hemmed in by the borders of their treaty, neither side dared expand its influence or interfere with his interests in the neighbouring systems.

He had spies throughout the Earth authorities, and yet somehow General Williams had managed to build up his forces to a level where he felt confident enough to open hostilities. If the Earth really had become strong enough to win the conflict at last, then all his plans would lie in ruins. The President of Earth must be persuaded to rein in her warmongering general, and give the Master time to restore the status quo.

The Master knocked on the door to the Ambassador's suite.

'Hello,' said the Ambassador when he opened the door. 'You're that chap who

advises the Emperor, aren't you? I must say it's good to see a human face. Makes a pleasant change from dealing with the dragons.'

The Master winced inwardly at the use of the humans' derogatory nickname for the Draconian. Was this the best person the Earth Empire could find to represent their interests? He wondered if their President would even listen to this fool. Nevertheless, he would have to try.

'I am the Master, and you will obey me,' he said.

'I swear we know nothing about any attack,' whined the Ambassador. 'None of our ships have even crossed the frontier. It is your battle cruisers that have been crossing the border to attack us.'

'Draconians are an honourable race, unlike you Earthmen,' replied the Prince. 'We do not break our treaties, or launch unprovoked attacks. However, we will respond to your crimes with deadly force.'

The Master held up his hands. 'Your imperial majesty, your highness, I was there when he spoke to his President. She seemed genuinely surprised. I suspect that this might be the work of some rogue faction.'

'Rogue faction or not, she is their leader and must be held accountable,' said the Emperor. 'These attacks must cease, and those responsible remanded to us for punishment, or we will be forced to declare a state of war.'

'I tell you, we've done nothing wrong,' protested the Ambassador. 'It's you dragons that have been attacking us.'

The Prince hissed in anger and reached for his weapon.

'Be quiet, you fool,' the Master ordered the Ambassador, 'or it will be your death that starts the war.'

The Ambassador's mouth clamped shut and the Master was relieved when everyone was distracted by the arrival of a messenger.

'My life at your command,' the messenger said, kneeling before the Emperor.

'What news do you have?'

'Your imperial majesty, another cargo ship has been attacked. However, our forces were nearby, and they managed to drive away the Earthmen before they could destroy it.'

'Finally, some real evidence,' said the Master. 'Your imperial majesty, with your permission, I will go there myself.'

'I can have a warship prepared to depart within the hour,' said the Prince.

‘No, I can travel faster in my own ship,’ said the Master.

‘Very well, you may go, but my son will still accompany you. And take this one with you also,’ said the Emperor, pointing to the Earth Ambassador. ‘Let him bear witness to the crimes of his race.’

The silence on the command deck of the Draconian cargo ship was broken as the Master’s TARDIS landed with a vwoorp, vwoorp sound. It shimmered for a moment before taking the form of a computer bank. Then the Master stepped out, with the Draconian Prince following close behind, his pistol raised. The Earth Ambassador hovered in the TARDIS doorway nervously, to make sure it was safe.

‘What desecration is this?’ hissed the Prince. ‘I can see the evidence of a great struggle, but where are the bodies of our heroic Draconian brothers?’

The Master surveyed the scene. The door had been pulled from its hinges, and the gaping hole was surrounded by laser blast marks. The control console had also sustained heavy damage, particularly the communications array, which had been destroyed by a blaster bolt.

‘My Prince,’ said the Master, ‘do you concur that these marks around the doorway were made by Draconian pistols?’

‘Undoubtedly. My people fought valiantly to repel the boarders.’

‘And you, Ambassador. Do you think this damage to the console is the work of your weapons?’

‘I really could not say,’ said the Ambassador. ‘I don’t really know about guns. I prefer to fight with my words.’ He started to laugh at his own words, but then trailed off when he realised the Master and the Prince were glowering at him.

‘Well I am familiar with Earth weapons,’ said the Master, ‘yet I do not recognise this blast pattern.’

‘Every day they are developing new weapons to use against us,’ said the Prince.

‘That is true, but look at the door. This was not the work of a blaster, someone ripped it from its hinges. I have never met a human with the raw strength to accomplish such a feat. No, gentlemen, something is not right here.’

While the Master had been inspecting the room, the Prince had been working at the damaged console.

‘Look at this,’ he said, pointing to a cracked screen that he had managed to

coax into life.

The three men watched the footage of a battleship as it drew closer and docked with the Draconian cargo ship.

‘This is our enemy,’ said the Prince. ‘See how they fire upon our vessel without provocation. Surely now, Master, you will support my position. We must acknowledge that we are, once more, at war with the Earthmen.’

The Master studied the screen thoughtfully. ‘There are no markings on this battleship and it is not of a configuration that I recognise. It could be that the Ambassador here has been telling us the truth and that it is not the humans who have been attacking us.’

‘Then who? There is no other force in this galaxy strong enough to stand against the might of the Draconian Empire. These are tricks and lies, designed to distract us and delay our retribution.’

‘It is possible,’ said the Master, ‘but I ask your highness to give me a little more time. Let us return to Draconia where I may study this footage in more detail. Rest assured that I will not rest until I have identified this ship and its crew have faced justice at your hands.’

‘The Emperor demands your presence.’

‘Please inform his imperial majesty that I attend upon him as soon as I have the answers he seeks.’

‘One does not refuse a summons from his imperial majesty.’

The Master bristled with annoyance. This petty functionary dared to give orders to him, not just a noble of Draconia but a Lord of Time itself. He longed for the day when Earth and Draconia finally wore each other down and he could dispose of both petty empires. However, until then, the pretence of servitude, however painful, had to be maintained.

‘We have only just returned and I have work to do. His imperial highness, the Prince, can relay what we have ascertained so far.’

‘I was instructed to inform you that you may end your investigation. A new emissary has arrived at court and has the answers to all your questions.’

‘A new emissary? Take me to the Emperor at once,’ ordered the Master.

‘Very good, my Lord.’ The courtier smirked at his victory, and the Master resolved to punish him later at a more suitable juncture, before his insubordination spread.

‘My life at your command.’ The Master bowed and kissed the Emperor’s hand.

‘My loyal servant. I am pleased you have returned safely. Events have progressed quickly in your absence. An emissary from Earth has arrived, bearing evidence of the true force behind these attacks against us.’

The Master turned. The emissary stood out amidst the Draconian nobles and servants. He was a short man, wearing a dark brown jacket and leaning on an umbrella with a large red handle, which absurdly seemed to be shaped like a question mark. The emissary was in the process of raising a straw hat by way of greeting, when he made eye contact with the Master and halted.

‘You! What are you doing here?’

‘Silence, Earthman,’ said the Emperor. ‘You will not address any member of my court with such disrespect.’

‘I am not human, and neither is that man,’ said the emissary. ‘Whatever he has told you is a lie. He is a dangerous criminal.’ He spoke in a heavy Scottish accent, rolling the letter r around until he sounded like an angry insect.

‘Criminal? That is preposterous, Doctor,’ the Master replied. ‘I am a trusted noble of the court.’

‘You know this man then?’ asked the Emperor.

‘Indeed. He calls himself the Doctor and is a member of my own race. A renegade who travels the universe, interfering in the affairs of other species in defiance of our laws.’

‘Said the pot to the kettle,’ muttered the Doctor.

‘I suppose you are here to intercede on behalf of the Earthmen,’ said the Master. ‘You always did have an unfathomable fondness for them.’

‘I am here to save lives. Your majesty, the Earthmen are not responsible for the attacks on your vessels.’

‘I concur,’ said the Master.

‘Please hear me out,’ said the Doctor. ‘I have evidence to back up... wait, you agree with me?’

‘Don’t look so surprised Doctor. I have just come from the scene of the latest attack. It is quite obvious that some other race is involved.’

‘Who is it then that dares attack the Draconian Empire?’ asked the Emperor.

‘They are called Ogrons,’ said the Doctor. ‘I have encountered them before. They live for war and conflict.’

‘Are you sure, Doctor?’ asked the Master. ‘I am, of course, aware of the Ogrons. They are a brutish and primitive race. However, I have never heard of them operating near this sector.’

‘I have the evidence here.’ The Doctor took out a data card and passed it to the nearest courtier. ‘I intercepted this transmission from the Ogron ship that has been attacking you.’

‘Play it,’ ordered the Emperor.

A panel opened up, to reveal a hidden screen, and after a moment a face appeared. It was a large creature with dark, leathery skin topped with lank strands of dark hair. When he spoke, his voice was deep and guttural.

‘You must increase the frequency of your attacks. The Earthmen and the Draconians are not taking the threat seriously enough.’

He paused, and seemed to be listening to a reply, although the other side of the conversation could not be heard on the recording.

‘Your next target is an Earth cargo ship just about to pass through sector 17, near the border.’

The recording ended and the Doctor addressed the court again. ‘You heard for yourselves, the Ogrons are responsible for all of this.’ He turned to the Earth Ambassador. ‘They are the ones attacking your ships too. They are hoping to foment a war that will destroy you both.’

‘Pray tell, Doctor, to what end?’ asked the Master. ‘I have only ever heard the Ogrons spoken of as mercenaries. Those lumbering idiots could never have thought up such a scheme by themselves.’

The Master had considered employing the Ogrons himself, in the past, but had decided they were too stupid to be worth the effort. He would have had to spend all his energy supervising their every move.

‘If the Ogrons are indeed responsible,’ continued the Master, ‘it will be at the behest of another race. It could even be the Earthmen, trying to deceive us.’

‘Or they could be working for the dragons,’ said the Earth Ambassador.

There was a chorus of hissing from all around the room.

‘Such slander is intolerable,’ said the Prince. ‘We are an honourable race and do not engage in deception and trickery.’

The Doctor stepped between the two dignitaries, holding out his arms to keep them apart, quite unnecessarily in the Master’s opinion.

‘I am sure neither of you are responsible,’ said the Doctor. ‘You have both suffered losses. The only sensible course of action is to come together to address this common enemy.’

‘It is not so simple, Doctor,’ said the Emperor. ‘We already have reports that Earth has increased its military activity near the frontier.’

‘As has Draconia,’ said the Ambassador.

‘I cannot leave my subjects unprotected while we are threatened in this way.’

‘Then you need an agreement to withdraw,’ said the Doctor. ‘You must hold a peace conference at once. I will mediate between you and I am certain we can resolve this matter swiftly.’

The Master studied the Doctor. Normally he could read his fellow Time Lord like a book, but this incarnation was more reserved. He knew more than he was telling them. Was this a plot to usurp the position the Master had worked so many years to achieve?

‘Your imperial majesty, I am sure we all thank the Doctor for bringing us this evidence, but I do not think we need to involve him any further. This matter can be resolved without any further interference from him.’

‘I agree,’ said the Emperor. ‘We will not require your services, Doctor. You may leave Draconia.’

‘Now, hang on a minute,’ said the Ambassador. ‘I would like him to stay. Seems like he’s the only one who knows what is going on. I will be advising the President to insist that he facilitate the negotiations.’

‘Very well,’ said the Emperor. Then he pointed to a courtier. ‘You, see that the Doctor is given accommodation while we prepare for this peace conference and the arrival of the full Earth delegation.’

The courtier bowed deeply, then led the Doctor from the room.

Despite taking the credit for arranging this impromptu conference, the Doctor did not seem inclined to help with the preparations. Instead it fell to the Master to ensure that everything was as it should be. It was hours before he could get away, but when he did he headed straight for the Doctor’s quarters. He wanted to speak his old adversary away from the prying ears of the court.

As he approached the room, he heard voices coming from inside.

‘How much longer am I going to be stuck here, Professor?’ asked a young female voice. There was a lot of static on her comms link and the Master strained to hear what she was saying.

‘Patience, Ace,’ replied the Doctor. ‘The negotiations will begin soon and I doubt that they will take very long.’

‘They had better not,’ said Ace. ‘I can’t wait to get off this ship. It’s getting ripe in here. You would have thought these apes would have invented deodorant before moving on to spaceships.’

The other voice obviously belonged to the Doctor’s latest travelling companion, and it sounded as if she was aboard an Ogron ship. The Master moved closer to the door to hear better, but as he did so, his foot knocked against the doorframe.

‘There’s somebody coming,’ whispered the Doctor. ‘I have to go. Hang in there, Ace. It won’t be much longer.’ Then the Master heard the chime of the call disconnecting.

There was no point in stealth now, so the Master stepped inside the room.

‘So, Doctor, I was coming to ask where you have been getting all your valuable information, now I know.’

The Doctor finished shutting down the communications station and then turned to face the Master.

‘How much did you hear?’

‘Your companion – Ace was it? – is spying on the Ogrons. I am impressed. You are usually far too worried about the young women you travel with to use them to their full advantage. Perhaps you are becoming more ruthless, at last.’

‘I assure you, Ace is quite capable of taking care of herself. Anyway, now you know everything.’

‘Hardly, Doctor. You still have not explained, to my satisfaction, who is behind these attacks.’ He held up a black-gloved hand to stop the Doctor before he could reply. ‘Please do not insult my intelligence by claiming, once again, that the Ogrons are acting alone. Surely your spy has been able to find out something.’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘I can assure you, Ace has reported no evidence of any other race.’

‘Then you have clearly overestimated her competence. I hope, for your sake, that she is not too far out of her depth. It would be a pity if you were to lose her.’

‘Is that a threat?’

The Master laughed, ‘No, no, Doctor. I am not the enemy here. For once we are both working towards the same end.’

‘I highly doubt that. You will have your own agenda, as always. You will betray the Draconians, just like you have betrayed all your friends in the past.’

‘Doctor, you wound me. I just want to stop this conflict from escalating. Surely, even you cannot find cause to criticise that.’

The Doctor harrumphed quietly, but he did not argue.

‘Now, unless you have any more secret intelligence to share with me, I must take my leave,’ said the Master. ‘There is a lot to be done to make everything ready for your star turn at the peace conference tomorrow.’

‘This is unacceptable,’ complained the President of Earth. ‘I will not negotiate like this.’ Her ship had arrived in the early hours of the morning and both she and General Williams had been taken directly to the Draconian throne room, where the peace conference was due to begin shortly.

‘Madam President,’ said the Master. ‘It is a sign of the importance the Emperor places upon these peace talks that his imperial majesty has decided to attend them himself.’

‘That is all well and good. I too have gone to great efforts to attend these talks, rather than delegate them to our Ambassador. It still does not explain why he will not be sitting at the negotiating table, where we can talk as equals.’

‘I am sorry, Madam President, but here on Draconia you are not equals. The Emperor must sit on his throne, above his people – to descend would be a stain on his honour and invite challenges to his rule. The Prince will sit opposite you, and conduct the negotiations. Even this should be considered a great honour. Please do not ask us to compromise further.’

‘Having trouble with the seating plan, are we?’ said the Doctor as he strolled into the room. ‘I hate that. I always find myself stuck between the most boring people, and too far away from the bread basket.’

He took a few pieces of fruit from a platter, and weighed them up in his hands, as though he was about to start juggling them. The Master glared at him and, for once, the Doctor took his hint and sat down at the head of the table, without any tomfoolery.

A few moments later there was a fanfare and the Emperor entered, accompanied by members of his court, including the Prince. Once the Emperor had taken his place on the throne, the Prince kissed his hand and then sat down at the negotiating table.

Realising that, now the Emperor had arrived, the argument over the seating arrangements had probably been lost, the President of Earth sat down at the negotiating table. However, General Williams chose to stay standing behind her.

‘Shall we begin?’ asked the Doctor.

‘Before you start,’ said the Master. ‘I must inform you all that there was another attack on a Draconian vessel during the night.’

‘You see, there is no time to waste. Earth and Draconia need to start working together now to defeat this common enemy.’

‘Your imperial majesty, madam president, you still do not know who is behind these attacks. As I have said, repeatedly, the Ogrons are not intelligent enough to launch such a co-ordinated campaign alone.’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ said the Doctor, impatiently. ‘Whether it is the Ogrons, Terileptils, Daleks, or Sinister Sponges, what matters is that there are threats out there which you are not capable of facing alone.’

The delegates around the table all started talking at once, but the Master held up his hand and they settled down.

‘The threat is real,’ he said gravely, ‘but it is not out there, it is in this very room.’

‘I told you we should not have come here, Madam President’ said General Williams. ‘This is clearly a trap.’

‘We would never resort to such trickery,’ replied the Draconian Prince.

‘I have seen the face of the enemy,’ said the Master.

Everyone fell silent, waiting to hear what he would say next.

‘When I received word of the attack last night, I hurried there in my TARDIS. I was not able to prevent the Ogrons from overrunning the ship, but I did manage to intercept this transmission from their leader.’

The Master walked around to a display screen and activated it. An image of a human woman appeared on the screen.

‘Draconian vessel. Shut down your engines and prepare to be boarded...’

The rest of her message was drowned out as everyone in the room started shouting at once. All except the Doctor, who had fallen silent and was staring intently at the handle of his umbrella.

‘Enough of this charade,’ said the Draconian Emperor. His aged voice was thin, but yet it still carried enough authority to cut through the clamour, and everyone turned towards the throne. ‘This conference is at an end. The Master has proved the humans are behind these attacks. We have no choice but to declare a state of war. Madam President, you are here under a flag of truce, so I will allow you to leave, but do so quickly and take your Ambassador with you.’

The Master approached the throne. ‘My life at your command,’ he said, and kissed the Emperor’s hand. ‘However, before you banish the Earthmen there is more that you need to know.’

‘Continue,’ said the Emperor, and the Master bowed deeply.

‘This human,’ he said, pointing at the screen, ‘is not in the employ of the Earth Empire. She is an agent of the Doctor.’

‘Is this true?’ said the President of Earth. ‘Doctor, we believed we could trust you. How could you implicate us in such a terrible crime?’

‘Neither of you would listen to reason,’ said the Doctor angrily. ‘You needed to be brought to this negotiating table for your own good. The Ogrons were a ruse, but only to prepare you. There are real threats out there, watching and waiting while you slowly grind each other down. Then, when you are too weak to put up a fight, they will emerge from the shadows, and there will be nothing anyone will be able to do to stop them.’

‘He admits it,’ said the Master. ‘All those ships. All those loyal Earthmen and Draconians massacred in the service of his Machiavellian schemes.’

The Doctor looked panicked. ‘No, no. I would never have allowed such a thing. All your people are being held safely as prisoners on the Ogron homeworld. You were meant to liberate them once the peace treaty had been concluded.’

‘A likely story,’ said the Master. ‘The Ogrons are violent brutes. They would not have spared anyone.’

‘We will dispatch a fleet to their planet at once to see for ourselves,’ said the Emperor.

‘And our forces will join you,’ said the President of Earth, ‘but what about this warship that has been terrorising the frontier?’

‘You need not concern yourselves about that,’ said the Master. ‘I tracked it after the attack last night and when I returned to Draconia I sent three heavy cruisers to intercept it. They should be coming within range at any moment and, when they do, they will wipe this menace from the skies forever.’

The Doctor leapt up. ‘No, you cannot do this. Ace is aboard that ship.’

The Master ignored him and pressed a button. The image on the screen changed to that of a Draconian officer.

‘Captain,’ said the Master, ‘are you ready?’

‘We are.’

‘Then, with the Emperor’s permission.’ The Master turned towards the throne for confirmation and the Emperor nodded. ‘You may commence your attack.’

‘No,’ shouted the Doctor and he ran from the room.

‘Apprehend that man,’ shouted the Draconian Prince, but the Doctor had already passed the guards before they could react.

‘Do not worry about him,’ said the Master. ‘Whether he manages to get his TARDIS there in time to save his accomplice is immaterial. He cannot stop our ships and, now that he has been exposed, his ability to manipulate you is at an end.’

‘As are these negotiations,’ said General Williams. ‘We were brought here under false pretences and I see no need to continue to discuss a peace treaty devised by a criminal.’

The Master walked around the room and sat in the seat at the head of the table, recently vacated by the Doctor. He arched his hands together under his chin.

‘You could leave,’ he said, ‘but as horrific as his methods were, the Doctor was correct in one regard. Your mighty empires could be a great force for good in the universe if you worked together. Why not sit and consider the possibility of peace?’

There was some grumbling from around the table, but nobody left. The Doctor had been right. This would be a powerful alliance. It just needed the right man to shape it.

The Master smiled. ‘Shall we begin?’

A Diplomatic Solution

Matthew Kresal

Is the third world war imminent?

Sir Reginald Styles sighed at the opinion piece headline. Not because there wasn't any truth to what it said, as the fact he was flying to Peking could attest. No, it was because of just how much truth there was to it. As the twenty-year veteran diplomat closed his eyes, he thought how nice it would be if he could forget about it all for a few moments.

Forget the weight the world on my shoulders.

'Excuse me,' a man's voice interrupted Styles' rest.

Styles' eyes popped open and he turned towards the aisle. There stood a man a little older than himself, with white hair parted on the left side, wearing both a grey three-piece tailored suit and an apologetic look on his bearded face. The newcomer cleared his throat and continued.

'I beg your pardon, Sir Reginald, I was wondering if I may sit here?'

'What?' the diplomat blinked, not quite catching what he meant.

The man pointed down toward the seat next to Styles, currently occupied only by a closed ministerial briefcase. The diplomat offered an embarrassed, apologetic cough and lifted up the case.

'Much appreciated,' the man said as he sat down. 'It's good to be here with you, Sir Reginald.'

Styles sat up, aware that he didn't know who the fellow was. Only his staff and a skeleton crew should have been aboard the requisitioned Concorde, now flying at some sixty thousand feet.

'I don't recognise you, sir.' Styles' words were a sharp instrument, cutting through all pretence and nonsense. It was part of what had made him so vital, and he hoped it would lead to success with getting the Red Chinese to come to the peace conference. Right now, however, his attention was on the stranger.

'I'm just a civil servant,' the fellow announced in a genial tone. 'Sent along to help you, where I can. A sort of...' he paused as if looking for the right phrase, 'diplomatic troubleshooter.'

'Is that so?' Styles was sceptical of the claim, though he measured his tone to hide the fact. 'Seems like an interesting way to describe your work, if I may say so?'

'You may,' the man chuckled, 'and you should know. Sir Reginald Styles, the

man who will save the world.'

Styles rolled his eyes. 'You can't believe everything you read in the papers, you know.'

'Oh, I don't have to, Reggie.' The man's tone had suddenly taken on a harder edge. 'I learned about you through an old friend of mine.'

'Is that so?' The diplomat was tiring of this conversation, if only because he was no closer to learning who this fellow was. 'And who would that friend be?'

'Oh, he works at UNIT.' The man was suddenly jovial again, looking at Styles with a broad, unsettling smile. 'He calls himself the Doctor. He's their scientific advisor, the boss's right hand man, don't you know? I think you met them just before you left?'

Styles felt his heart skip a beat. His eyes widened. 'How do you know about that? That should be—'

'Secret information?' The fellow offered a *tisk, tisk*. 'Our people are good at keeping secrets when they want to. This time, though, it was a... what is it your security people say... ah yes, 'a need to know' matter.'

Styles leaned toward the man. Now he just had to know what the hell was going on here. Who were the 'our people' that he spoke about? The Secret Service? More of those bumbling oafs at UNIT?

Without warning, the Concorde's nose lurched earthward. Styles felt his face pressed into the back of the seat in front of him. It took all his efforts to lift his arms and push himself away from the chair. He looked to his right, out the window to see the grey Mediterranean Sea stretched out beyond, and yet, rising to greet the dart of a plane.

'This is the cockpit,' the strained voice of the plane's Captain spoke from the speaker boxes at either end of the cabin. 'All flight systems have cut out. We are working to rectify the fault and see if we can stabilise the airplane.'

'What the hell happened?' Styles found himself thinking aloud. He felt a tap on his shoulder, and he turned, suddenly remembering the strange fellow in the seat next to him. Dressed in his impeccable suit, he looked as cool as a cucumber, unfazed by events even as the shrill cries of others in the cabin filled the plane.

'That would be my doing, I'm afraid.' The man lifted his left hand to reveal a peculiar looking black box. 'I've disabled the electronics keeping this plane aloft. You've got another fifty-one seconds or so to live.'

Styles' eyes widened further, appalled by what he was hearing. The diplomat wanted to reach out for the man, but his arms were busy keeping him from

plowing into the seat in front of him. All he could do was stare at the man impotently.

‘You’re going to die,’ the man informed him with a cold, analytical bluntness, ‘but you should know you’re dying for a good cause. You’re going to save the world, Reggie, and more besides. That should answer why I’m doing all this.’

‘But,’ Styles strained to get out, ‘who are you?’

‘Me?’ The man smiled and lifted his black box. ‘I told you, I’m a friend of the Doctor’s. I am the Master. And you are going to die for me.’

A prickling sting filled the air, causing Styles to blink. When he opened his eyes again, this angel of death had vanished. The diplomat wanted to reach out, to set his doubts aside but remembered that he couldn’t. Bracing himself against the seat in front of him, Styles instead turned back to the window and awaited his end as the sea offered the plane its watery embrace.

‘It should have worked!’ The Master banged his fist against the TARDIS console. In this incarnation, fighting the Time War with all the machinations he could bring to bear, he wasn’t keen on such outbursts, and he stepped away from the machine in surprise. He took a deep breath, his right hand running through the thick swath of white hair draped across the right side of his head.

‘Why didn’t it work?’ He looked toward the scanner screen, his blue eyes a portrait of puzzlement. He had landed the TARDIS near Piccadilly Circus, hoping to find one of the newsagents set up near the headquarters of the British Secret Service, to confirm that Styles’ plane had gone down. Instead, he’d landed among rubble as the unwelcome flakes of nuclear fallout rained from the sky.

None of which made any sense. The death of Styles was supposed to have a calming effect on matters, make the squabbling humans step back from throwing their nuclear missiles at one another. That had been too much to hope for, it seemed.

‘Well,’ the Master purred after a moment’s thought, ‘we’ll just have to find another way, won’t we?’

He took a step forward and began to move around the TARDIS console. He made stops at each of its six sides, looking and reading and flicking switches. After a few moments, he stopped moving, a curious expression on his face.

‘So I’m not the only time traveller around,’ he murmured, his gaze fixed upon

a small screen. He raised a hand to his face again, lost in thought. ‘Now let me see. This Doctor doesn’t have use of his TARDIS, however much he tinkers with it. It’s not Time Lord technology as the energy signature suggests something rather cruder. More like something the Daleks used centuries ago. They’re too busy working to lay siege to Kasterborous to be here, I’d think.’

The Master pressed a pair of buttons on the console. The screen image changed, revealing a map of the British Isles, which gradually zoomed in. ‘So, where is all this activity focused on, I wonder?’

The image moved to the north of London. The traces of artron energy all converged in a small area, the majority of them in nearly the exact same spot. The Master considered this for a moment and pressed another button, accessing the TARDIS data bank.

‘And where would be a hotspot for time travellers to the 20th century?’ he wondered aloud as the information appeared. He let out an exasperated sigh.

‘Oh, it would be there, wouldn’t it?’

‘Halt!’ So came the soldier’s cry through the morning air. The young man in green army fatigues stepped forward, with a brown cap – complete with a UNIT emblem pinned to it – hiding a crew cut of red hair. He held a rifle at the ready as he approached with caution.

‘Identify yourself, please?’

‘Of course,’ the Master smiled. Still dressed in his business suit, he stepped forward. ‘I’m a member of Sir Reginald’s team, sent ahead to help get the house ready.’

‘Is that so?’ The soldier was sceptical, but, then, the Master would have expected no less. ‘Do you have any written authorisation?’

‘Of course...’ The Master paused to look at the soldier’s shoulders, checking for indications of rank. ‘Of course, Corporal...?’

‘Shaffer,’ The soldier lowered his rifle slightly. ‘Where’s your authorisation?’

‘Right here, Corporal.’ The Master handed over what looked to be a wallet – a rather nifty thing he’d picked up from a contact inside the Celestial Intervention Agency. Especially when the soldier handed it back, convinced that what he read was genuine.

‘Very well, sir,’ Corporal Shaffer replied politely. ‘Apologies for delaying you. Only my Captain and Sergeant are away at the moment...’

‘No need to apologise,’ the Master offered an understanding smile. He thought back to his time on Earth in this era, briefly remembering the two men, Yates and Benton. The ones who had helped put him in a prison cell and whom he would soon help deal with a group of would-be despots from a ruined parallel Earth. The Master smiled at the memory of that particular adventure.

‘The Doctor and Miss Grant are up at the house,’ Shaffer went on to explain. ‘You might run into them.’

‘Oh, I hope not,’ the Master replied with a laugh. ‘I do so hate awkward encounters, don’t you?’

‘You could say that,’ the corporal shrugged. ‘Be careful, sir.’

‘You too, Corporal Shaffer.’

The Master walked up a trail leading to the house. He was thankful the sentry hadn’t pushed further into his cover story. He had counted on the fact that UNIT would only know him by one face in this era, and that part of his plan was working.

Now if I can just avoid the Doctor and Miss Grant...

The Master had expected more sentries as he approached the house. Instead, the isolated house was surprisingly unguarded.

For a house that seemed so large on the outside, it was terribly cramped on the inside. In the entrance hall, a rather unimpressive but ancient-looking tapestry caught the Master’s attention.

‘Can’t say I’m impressed by the decor,’ he muttered when he surveyed the rest of the hall. It was like someone’s clichéd idea of a country house’s interior, complete with a loud grandfather clock whose metronome rang throughout the empty house.

‘Curiouser and curiouser,’ the Master observed with amusement. ‘If you’re here, Doctor, where are you?’

As if cued by some unseen director, voices echoed from the ether. Instinct sent the Master into the nearest hiding spot, a small alcove that led to what he presumed was a coat closet. He sunk into the darkness as a door creaked open down the corridor, coming up from a cellar by the sound of things.

‘We should have just killed him,’ a man’s voice sailed down the corridor. ‘His companion is gone, so what use is he?’

‘You were the one who spoke of hostages,’ a woman’s voice said. ‘He could still be useful that way.’

‘I suppose,’ the man sighed. ‘Do you think Boaz has returned already?’

The Master leaned forward ever so slightly. Down the corridor, he spotted the

source of the voices. He guessed they were both in their thirties. Both of them were dressed in grey and white camouflage combat suits and were holding rather interesting looking weapons, the sort of things humans would have called 'ray guns.' Which was odd, given that not even UNIT had them in this period.

'I see you're not locals, are you?' The Master spoke in a charming tone as he stepped out from the shadows. The pair snapped to attention, the woman's bundle of dark hair waving as her head snapped toward him. The Master sighed, putting up his hands limply. 'I'm not a local either if it makes you feel any better.'

'Styles!' The man in front of him gasped. The fellow raised his weapon, his body tensing. 'I can end this—'

'I'd rather you didn't, if it's all the same to you.' The Master gave him a hard stare. His companion looked over at her comrade, worry in her eyes. Concern quickly gave way to fear as she brought her gun to bear. The Master shook his head, his tongue delivering a soft *tsk, tsk* at her. 'The same goes for you, my dear.'

The pair lowered their weapons, blank expressions washing over them. The Master kept his attention focused on them both, knowing how delicate keeping two subjects under his spell at once could be. Not that either of them was putting up much of a struggle at the moment.

'First things first,' his cold blue eyes looked them over, 'who are you?' Both tried to speak at the same time, causing the Master to raise a hand. 'Ladies first, I think.'

'Anat.'

'Boaz.'

'Good,' the Master purred. 'That question is out of the way. Next one: Who sent you?'

'Monia,' came Anat's answer. 'We travelled on his order.'

'So, not a Dalek, then? One of their stooges, perhaps?'

'No!' Boaz grunted between gritted teeth. 'We are fighting the Daleks. We must...'

The Master raised a curious eyebrow. 'You must what? And what is your interest in Styles?'

Boaz tensed, though Anat seemed to remain relaxed. The Master focused his attention on the man, fearing what might happen if he broke free from his mental grip. Maybe she would answer the question, so he repeated it, adding her name to his inquiry.

‘He must die,’ she answered matter of factually. ‘His bomb will kill the diplomats tomorrow, starting the wars.’

‘The wars?’ Now there was an answer the Master hadn’t expected. *The War*, yes, but not multiple ones. Only one thing for that, unfortunately. ‘What wars, my dear?’

‘The ones that let the Daleks and Ogrons take over.’

The Master’s brow furrowed. ‘Did you say the Daleks and the Ogrons? Big, lumbering creatures with long hair?’

‘Yes,’ Anat answered with deliberate slowness. ‘They are their foot soldiers. Them and a few humans willing to work alongside them for better conditions.’

‘I see,’ the Master nodded, purring the words. A theory was developing in his mind, one that needed another detail. He turned to the man. ‘Tell me, if you’d be so kind, when it is you’re from?’

The man rattled off a year from the twenty-second century. The Master’s brow unfurrowed, his blue eyes widened with understanding. Things made sense now.

A persistent beeping began transmitting out of the Master’s pocket. He rolled his eyes at the interruption, wondering what could be setting it off until he looked at the readings on the chronon energy detector and found the one thing he hadn’t anticipated.

‘Incoming?’ The Master whispered with mild bewilderment. Not far from the house, in the nearby woods, perhaps. The readings were in the database, Dalek ones, primitive by the current standards of the Time War, but still a menace. Did that mean Daleks or Ogrons?

The Master looked up from the device, intending to put that question to the pair of 22nd century commandos. Anat and Boaz weren’t looking at him any longer but had their heads down, shaking them as if coming out of a daze. The Master’s trance over them was gone, and he had to think fast.

The Master silenced the detector, stuffing it back into his pocket. He moved sideways, back into the depths of the alcove. Losing sight of the humans behind a suit of armour, the Master found himself thinking of the game children the universe-over play and the belief that somehow if you can’t see someone, they can’t see you either. Now he was betting his life upon that very notion.

‘Let’s see if Shura is waiting,’ said the female one, taking command.

The man with her said nothing, though the Master heard footfalls and a door open. They had forgotten all about him he realised as he eavesdropped.

There was a loud pop, then a crashing of glass. The Master listened keenly, closing his eyes before pressing an ear against the wall. The walls filtered out

much of what was happening, but he could still make out the sounds of battle. A type of fight that shouldn't be taking place in this century.

The Master heard new footsteps. At first, he thought they belonged to the missing guerrilla they had mentioned. The sound was all wrong. The footsteps belonged not to a soldier in combat boots but to something far more dignified. Someone who, the Master realised from the cautiousness in their step, was also a visitor to this house.

A door opened, followed by a thump and more movement. A scuffle had taken place by the sound of things. Then the Master heard the female shouting, 'Come on, Boaz, out! Out, out!'

The Master looked into the corridor beyond, once again using the alcove as cover. He saw the two commandos making their way past him, though only the female was armed now. Now, where could the other one's weapon have gone?

'How do you do?' The Master heard the voice come from the room the soldiers had just left. For the faintest of moments, he felt a tug of nostalgia at the sound of a voice he hadn't heard in so many lifetimes. At least until the same voice let out a shriek of 'Hai!'

'Oh, Doctor.' The Master shook his head, barely containing a sigh. He was glad to have done so when, a moment later, the shock of white hair atop a young-old face appeared. The Doctor wore one of this incarnation's usual ensembles, a red velvet affair with a blue lined cape. Yes, this Doctor had always loved his capes.

The Doctor might even have noticed the Master had his attention been free. Instead, he was watching something else as he slowly backed down the corridor only to break into a full out sprint.

Curious, the Master stepped out of the alcove. His sense of smell was immediately under assault by the ugly scent of sweat and rotten food. It was a scent that again stirred the Master's memory and not a pleasant one at that. He reached into the inside pocket of his suit jacket and extracted the Tissue Compression Eliminator. Turning down the corridor, he found the source of the offending scent and squeezed the trigger.

The Ogron, clueless to the Master's presence, never saw it coming.

The Master stepped forward, scooping up and then pocketing the miniaturised thug. After all, he couldn't leave one of his calling cards for UNIT to find. He kept the TCE in hand as he moved to the door that everyone had so recently exited. Inside was a study, albeit one that had seen battle if the blown out French windows were anything to go by. The Master crept over to the window, ready to

drop any more of the brutes if they approached.

Reaching the window on the far end of the room, the Master slid slightly out of sight. A little way forward, two Ogrons were marching toward the front of the house, both armed. Checking whether UNIT troops had responded to the attack yet, the Master looked in the direction of where the two beasts were heading. To his surprise, the figure of the Doctor came into view.

‘You stupid fool!’ he growled at the sight of his old foe staring at the Ogrons. For a second, the Master considered shooting one of the creatures with the TCE. But even if it could reach the target, it would give away his presence and identity.

That left only one option. The Master centred his concentration on the Doctor, remembering a psionic skill that had been beyond his skill set when he’d been this Doctor’s contemporary. One which might save the fellow’s life now.

‘Shoot it,’ he whispered. To his surprise, the Doctor raised the weapon and fired. There came a flash, and one of the Ogrons was erased from existence. The Master smiled, wondering how this Doctor might react to such an out of character moment.

To the Master’s horror, the Doctor lowered the weapon. He could only watch as the Ogron began raising its own gun, prepared no doubt to remove the Doctor from existence. The Master considered the same trick again, but the Doctor being aware of it would make it harder to do a second time.

A jeep pulled into view, followed an instant later by a hail of machine gunfire. A wry grin formed across the Master’s face as he watched two of his old foes conferring with each other in the distance. After a moment, the Doctor was in the jeep and driving away. No doubt, the Master thought, going after the two from the future.

The Master moved away from the window and back through the house. The last thing he wanted was to run into familiar UNIT personnel. There were enough temporal hijinks in progress without his presence being made known. The humans and the Daleks had made a mess of things, he realised, creating a paradox of their own making. No wonder Styles and the Concorde hadn’t changed anything – Styles hadn’t been at the centre of things, after all. It was the peace conference and the house.

And now, the Master would have to straighten things out.

The thirty-six hours or so that followed unfolded exactly as the Master thought they would. Sitting in his TARDIS, the Master listened in on communications from news outlets and UNIT. The Doctor had vanished into thin air it seemed, with Yates and Benton sending out patrol after patrol in search of him. They did so in vain as the temporal readings indicated that numerous parties had gone back to the 22nd century, shortly after the events at the house. No doubt the Doctor had been among them, having the nose for trouble that he did.

The Master was grateful for the downtime. It meant that he could plan for when Styles and the delegates he would no doubt be bringing with him would arrive back at the house. Whatever happened, they had to be left alive when all this was over. And there was no doubt in the Master's mind that the 22nd century humans would have another go at assassination.

How they would do it, was the only question.

The Master considered the possibilities, observing the house again under the guise of being a member of the diplomatic staff. He spent an afternoon searching the house, just as he knew the UNIT soldiers had done. In his younger incarnation, he'd been keen on dismissing them as a bunch of amateurs. The truth, of course, was that they had learned fast, especially under the Doctor. Which wasn't to say they couldn't make mistakes.

After all, the Master reminded himself, they are only human.

It was mid-afternoon when the answer presented itself.

It occurred to the Master, standing in the hastily repaired and repainted study, that there was one flaw to having troops searching the grounds. It meant that there was simply no one around to keep an eye on the house. All of which suggested that a determined assassin could get through the net that way.

The man who ran across the yard was in the same grey and white camouflage combat suit as the pair yesterday, though this one didn't carry a ray gun. Based on the way he moved with a hunch and limping run, he'd perhaps suffered an injury. At the hands of an Ogron? Yes, that seemed plausible given the events of yesterday. He was carrying something else, however, and it was easy to guess what it was.

The Master decided the guerrilla would enter through one of the rear entrances, and he was not surprised when he stepped into the hallway and found the figure making his way through the house. He was unkempt, having spent a day and a night hiding nearby out of sight of UNIT soldiers and Ogrons. The thick mane of brown hair that covered his ears and draped down his neck, combined with a thick moustache, added to the appearance of being a wild man. It was completed

by how the eyes flared when he saw the Master.

‘There’s no need to worry,’ the Master calmly told him as he began exacting his influence over the fellow. ‘I’m here to help you.’

‘Here to help me?’ The man said flatly, his eyes glazing over. ‘How can you help me?’

The Master thought back to the previous day. What was the name that Anat and Boaz had mentioned? Might that be the rough looking character before him?

‘What do you have in your hand, Shura? Is it a bomb?’

Shura nodded.

The Master smiled approvingly. ‘Might I see it?’

Shura held out the device with his uninjured arm. The Master stepped forward and bent down, looking over the bomb. It might have mistaken for a bowl given its spherical nature, but it was wrapped in plastic and the detonating mechanism attached to the top made clear its deadly purpose. The design was unfamiliar, but that was hardly a surprise given its origin in an alternative timeline.

‘And you intended to use this when Styles came into the house?’ The Master paused to let the guerrilla nod a confirmation. The Time Lord weighed his options. How easy it would be to tell him to melt back into the woods, and, with the force of the instruction, he’d stay there until he starved to death. The bomb, however, was dangerous. No, not a source of danger, but potentially useful. Especially if the Daleks, snug in their 22nd century conquest, came to realise how central this event was to their power. Or, worse, followed the Doctor inevitably back in time.

Weighing the options, the Master made the decision. He moved away from the bomb. Then he stood tall, looking the warrior from another time in the eye.

‘You will go down to the cellar and prepare your bomb. You will await my instructions, understand?’

‘I understand,’ the guerrilla blindly replied. The Master nodded as another thought crossed his mind.

‘If the Daleks arrive, if you know for sure they are here, you must detonate it. Do it, only then... or when I tell you.’

‘Only then or when you tell me.’

‘Good. Now be on your way, lad. And forgot all about me.’

Shura tucked the plastic-wrapped bomb under his arm. The Master stepped to one side, letting the guerrilla pass him by, opening the door to the cellar. A moment later, he had vanished inside, the door closing with the faintest of clicks.

The Master smiled, allowing himself a chuckle. The chuckle faded as he heard

footsteps approaching. Clearing his throat, the Master turned, hands locked behind his back. He found a lady, perhaps in her thirties, with light brown hair and an earnest expression on her face.

‘Who are you?’ She inquired of the Master. The Master unlocked his hands and stepped forward, a smile on his face.

‘I’m one of Sir Reginald’s assistants. I came ahead to prepare the house.’

The earnest look became one of suspicion. ‘That’s not possible.’

‘Oh?’ The Master called the woman’s bluff. ‘Why is that?’

‘Because I’m Miss Paget, his secretary. And that is why *I* am here. So who the hell are you?’

‘Ah.’ So she hadn’t been bluffing. The Master cursed himself for not knowing. But, then, she hadn’t been on the Concorde. Whatever Styles had been up to, her job had been to stay behind. She would need to be dealt with, and quickly.

The Master took another step forward. Miss Paget took an instinctive step back, sensing malevolent intent. If only she knew what he intended for her.

‘Listen to me, Miss Paget,’ The Master said in his most calm and soothing voice. The terror on the woman’s face began to fade away. ‘Listen to me very carefully. Can you do that?’

She nodded. Miss Paget stood still, a calmness passing over her face. Her shoulders slackened, and the flight she might have broken into ended before it began.

‘Good. My dear, I want you to go about your business here, prepare it for the delegates. Once you have finished, tell the guards you are feeling tired and unwell. You will go home and rest. You will report to Sir Reginald tomorrow, feeling much better. Understand?’

Miss Paget gave the understanding nod the Master was seeking. He nodded back and snapped his fingers. The secretary blinked, shook her head as she came out of her daze, and ignored him as she entered the conference room. The Master watched on like a farmer inspecting his ripened fruit fields.

Now he simply needed to harvest them.

The Master watched Concorde touch down at RAF Manston at precisely 1800 hours. He had no doubt that Sir Reginald Styles would be on board this flight, having been tipped off by an unsuspecting UNIT officer. The fool who’d been tasked with picking up the diplomat had even been kind enough to let him hitch

a ride to the base.

Experience had taught the Master that one of the problems of writing and re-writing timelines was that one never could be sure what might carry over. The wings of memory could, on occasion, beat from one version of history to the next. Would Sir Reginald remember the older man from the Concorde, an echo of what once had been? Or would one of the UNIT people finally realise he shouldn't be there? It wasn't a chance worth taking.

Plus, he told himself, he was feeling nostalgic with everything going on. He could indulge in an old habit, one that had powered plenty of schemes in this era. So it was that the patch of white hair on his head disappeared under a balding patch surrounded by darker hair, and his beard vanished behind a long moustache.

'Sir Reginald?' He cried out over the roar of an RAF helicopter taking off. The diplomat looked out from the bottom of the stairs and saw the Master, a curious expression passing over his face. Briefcase in hand, Sir Reginald walked over to him.

'Who are you?' the diplomat demanded, his eyes narrowing as his head tilted back. 'Where is Miss Paget?'

'She's fallen ill, Sir Reginald. I'm assisting you in her place until she feels better.'

'I see.' Styles lowered his head before running his free hand over his face, as if that might wash away the tiredness on his face. 'Is there any chance of coffee before we get to the house?'

'There's a thermos in the car.' That wasn't a lie, as the Master had thought it might be necessary. Though perhaps drugging it wouldn't be now, since Sir Reginald seemed cooperative.

'Good! Let's go then!'

Sir Reginald said little to him on the drive to the house. He was too busy looking over papers he produced from his briefcase or on the car's built-in phone, talking with the Prime Minister in Downing Street. Jeremy was most insistent on several points, though the Master did not pay much heed to the details. He had, as humans liked to say, bigger fish to fry.

As the black staff car arrived back at the house, the UNIT hierarchy was there to greet Sir Reginald. There were even television crews parked on the lawn of the house. The Master stayed outside as Styles was led inside and took in the scene. All was calm at present, The Master thought. At least between the lines of the drama, humans, like so many species, brought in their politics. There was no

sign of anything untoward about to happen, but which would soon have to come.

Movement, at last, came in the form of a Land Rover with UNIT markings. It was the passenger the Master noted first, a blond female in what looked to be a check shirt and a pair of overalls. The Master sighed, remembering the dippy Jo Grant. The girl had never gotten a proper dress sense, had she?

It was the driver, leaping from his seat and racing up the steps into the house, who interested the Master more. He considered the dandified incarnation of his old adversary as he moved past him. How easy it would be to let the Doctor die here. It would save his past incarnations so much trouble. As Miss Grant followed in the Doctor's wake and the sounds of rifle and energy weapon fire began to filter in from in the distance, the Master knew it could not be so. No, it was time to get Styles and the other diplomats to safety.

'Another time, another place,' he muttered to himself. Briefcase in hand, he walked past the sentries. They didn't even inquire after a pass, as the Master entered the house. He walked through the hallway toward the study and conference room. Just off to one corner, he found a small group gathered.

'I will not leave!' Sir Reginald bellowed, the loudest of the group. 'I'll tell you all, yet again! I will not jeopardise the success of the conference!'

The Master slipped in behind Jo Grant and a UNIT chaperone, who stood between him and the flustered diplomat. A UNIT sentry looked the Master up and down, only to return his gaze straight down the corridor again having decided that the new arrival must have had clearance. Off to one side, Captain Yates was on the radio, receiving an update on how the battle was going from Sergeant Benton. No doubt it was in favour of the invaders.

'We're trying to help,' said Jo. 'You have to listen to us!'

Styles was having none of it of course. 'Look child, I'm—'

'Jo's right, and I'm afraid you have no choice in the matter!' said Captain Yates, pulling rank. 'My orders are to get you and the delegates away from here at once.'

'I absolutely refuse!' Styles made more effort to convince UNIT to let him stay, but Yates continued to insist on following orders. Needing an advantage, Style tried to pull off an old wheeze. 'But my papers, the documents.'

The Master took his chance. He lifted up the briefcase, catching the attention of Sir Reginald Styles. Styles knew he had lost before the Master had even opened his mouth.

'They're all here, sir.'

Styles swallowed the defeat with as much grace as the moment would afford

him. 'Well, I suppose I shall have to agree, but under protest!'

'This way, Sir Reginald,' Yates commanded. Styles nodded and walked with him toward the front entrance, leaving the Master alone for a moment. The Master saw that the other diplomats gathered from around the world were being led out of the conference room, escorted by UNIT troops. They'll be driven off to safety, no doubt. Only one question remained: where had the Doctor gone?

The Master passed the briefcase to another aide, asking them to give it to Sir Reginald. The aide, too intent on getting the hell out of there to ask questions, compliantly grabbed it. The Master waited for them all to leave. When he was sure nobody was coming back for him, he took a step forward, ready to tell Shura what to do.

The cellar door burst open. The Master felt his hearts skip a beat. It was the Doctor, stopping just long enough for Miss Grant to join him. They both saw him at the end of the hall, panic crossing their faces.

'Go!' shouted Jo before breaking into a run. 'You have to get out of here!'

'You heard her, move man!' The Doctor bellowed, quickly overtaking his companion in their sprint. 'There's a bomb that's going to go off!'

'I know, Doctor!' replied the Master instinctively. When he saw the surprise on their faces, he wondered for a moment if they would recognise who he was. He studied the Doctor's countenance in particular.

'You?' The Doctor said, at last, causing the Master to brace himself. 'You're a Time Lord, aren't you?'

The Master almost let out a sigh. Of course, I am! You don't recognise me?'

'You're familiar I'll grant you.' The Doctor took a step forward, curiosity passing over that young-old face. 'But I don't think we've met. And I never forget a face.'

'We haven't yet, anyway.' The Master sighed, realising it was too complicated to explain. 'Suffice to say I'm from our people's future.'

'Crossing timelines?'

'Quite so.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'But that's against the laws of time.'

'Some laws need to be broken, Doctor. Especially in the direst of circumstances.'

'Direst?' The Doctor stood tall and proud. 'Speak plainly, sir.'

'Doctor... and whoever *you* are,' Jo Grant protested, grabbing the Doctor's left elbow, 'there's a bomb, remember?'

The Master let an affectionate smile form on his lips. 'Indeed! You two get out

of here. I have transport already arranged.'

'I bet you have.' The Doctor spoke the words with mild distaste. 'Goodbye, whoever you are.'

'*Au revoir*, Doctor. And you, too, Miss Grant.'

Something passed unsaid between the trio as they stood there at the edge of the hall. An echo from the future, the Master wondered? Or perhaps it was the Doctor, knowing more than he was letting on?

The Doctor and Jo moved down the corridor toward the front of the house. The Master watched them leave and took a moment to reflect on the centuries that had passed, and all that had happened to each of them. If only the Doctor had known what was to come.

The Master heard another voice from the past, from much more recent memory. The grating, metallic tone could only belong to one species. And today was not the day to encounter them.

Stripping the mask from his face and holding it in one hand, the Master reached into his pocket and extracted a little black box. With a nostalgic smile, he pressed a button and vanished.

Seconds later a pair of Daleks slipped down the corridor in search of those that history told them would be here. They would not find them – they were long gone. Before the fools could realise it, Shura detonated the bomb.

Safely in the vortex and looking over the passing streams of time, the Master was most pleased with himself. The success of the Styles peace initiative would restore the air of detente between the superpowers and earn the diplomat a Nobel Peace Prize. And so the events of that autumn would fade into obscurity. The Master was not entirely concerned with the impact of his meddling upon human history.

The era of relative peace, and more particularly the lack of a Third World War, meant that the Earth the 22nd century Daleks found was more advanced and troublesome to conquer. They would devote far more time and resources to their invasion and occupation, one that the Doctor himself would eventually end in an even earlier incarnation. It meant that ships and Daleks would be in different places, and finally, the fabric of their campaigns across the cosmos would change.

The siege of Kasterborous had subsided. More than that, the Master saw in the

reports forwarded from Gallifrey that the effort had yet to begin. The Time Lords and the War Council would have months, maybe even a few years, to prepare in this time of reprieve. No doubt developing new strategies and weapons of war.

And, all the while, the Master would await another chance to once again turn things to his advantage.

Night of the Glaring

Greg Maughan

On board the 08:45 to Harrogate, the click-clack rhythm of the track set a pulsing pace for Jenkins' frantic scribbling.

The journey had been a snap decision and now he felt his career rested on it. Early that morning, before the smog-filtered London sun had even finished rising in the sky, with only the occasional lonely cleaner skulking around the Ministry building, Jenkins had let his suspicions get the better of him. Drifting ghost-like towards the office of the mysterious Professor Padrone, he had delicately rummaged through his office and sifted through his files. Nothing was out of the ordinary. No smoking gun. True, Padrone's filing cabinet had hidden a nicely aged bottle of scotch. But that wasn't exactly out of the ordinary in this particular corner of Whitehall. *The Spotters Guide to Cats of the British Isles* was more unusual, but Jenkins had no idea how that might fit into things...

Jenkins was about to give up when he found Padrone's diary secreted in the top right desk draw, heaven help him it had been locked in there before he'd liberated it. Jenkins mouth went dry with nerves as he turned the pages of the diary, slowly at first then faster and faster as the panic set in. He was in too deep to stop now. There had to be something. There. Under today's date, underlined. A place name. That must be it, he thought... 'Menwith Hill'.

Just a few hours later, Jenkins had left the shadow of the city behind him and was on his way up north. His mind was racing along with the train. The telegraph poles that dotted the landscape at regular intervals ticked past like a metronome dictating the pace of his work. Doing his best to ignore the tug of nerves in his gut, Jenkins struggled to structure his thoughts and get all his suspicions down on paper. This really was the last roll of the dice. Either his suspicions paid off and he'd be lauded as a hero, or he'd be up on gross misconduct charges for spying on a fellow civil servant and booted out of the Ministry faster than you can file a works request in triplicate!

Padrone had transferred in to the Ministry with impeccable references. But, talking in the Club after hours, no one seemed quite sure where he'd transferred in from.

His interest piqued, Jenkins started asking around. With subtlety, of course. 'Padrone, you say? Wasn't he a consultant on that business at Winnerden Flats a few years back?' 'I'm sure I knew a Padrone when I worked for the consulate

out in the Jamaica office. Tall fellow. Very intense.’ ‘Of course, he’s an old boy from Cambridge. No, now you mention it, I don’t remember him at all. But he seemed to know old Samson, alright!’ The Professor seemed a shadow, half-remembered by those that spoke to Jenkins in the discreet corners of the Club.

Even more unusually, no one quite knew what Padrone’s portfolio was. Every time Jenkins asked, he got a different answer. Agriculture, Energy... Business Development. Jenkins checked with each department over the days that followed. It seemed he didn’t work for any of them, although they all said they’d be happy to have him: *‘Just the sort of chap we’re after – comes highly recommended.’*

Taking a different tack, Jenkins started working on the girls in the typing pool – a greatly underutilised resource, in his opinion. It took his most charming smile and a few coffees to get them to start talking, but it was time well spent. Jenkins lived for the intrigue of Whitehall. But unlike a lot of the older Civil Servants, he realised that these girls, along with the Clerks and Assistants, were the life blood of the service, keeping things moving through the corridors of power. And it was the girls that were able to tell him every file Padrone had ordered copies of since arriving at the Ministry.

Experimental communications systems – British Rocket Group reports – Satellite development. What did any of it have to do with Agriculture? Or any of the other innocuous portfolios Padrone was rumoured to cover? No! These were all vital state secrets! And being ordered by a man of unknown origins for unknown purposes. No matter how trustworthy, how much of a good sort others found him, Jenkins just didn’t feel comfortable around Professor Padrone. To top it all, the man sported a goatee beard!

But Jenkins still lacked the smoking gun. Which was how he’d found himself at Padrone’s desk at 5:30 in the morning, then on the train to Harrogate when he knew full well he was supposed to see Julia from the typing pool for coffee and sandwiches at lunch, then trying to write his suspicions up in an ad hoc report to Lord Rowlands without sounding like a raving paranoiac!

As the train slowed to a gentle chug, ready for its arrival at Harrogate station, Jenkins hurriedly wrapped up his report. He bundled it into a Civil Service standard brown paper envelope and scribbled a Westminster address on it. Licking a few stamps and slapping them skew-whiff in the top right corner, he got up from his seat and shuffled along the aisle to the carriage doors.

The taste of gum arabic lingered on his tongue as he dropped the anonymous looking envelope in the post box next to the station exit and rushed towards the

taxi rank, then onwards to Menwith Hill, fidgeting in the back of the taxi as adrenaline built up within him.

Jenkins was beginning to regret offering five bob on the fare for the driver to go flat out as they careered at break-neck speed through the undulating Knaresborough countryside. Thrown from side to side in the back of the taxi, he got an occasional tantalising glimpse of Menwith Hill before they dived back down the next hill at a slightly faster pace than Jenkins could stomach.

Photographs he'd seen of the site hadn't quite prepared him for how odd Menwith Hill was in the landscape. Giant white snow globes dominated the view, giving a surreal tinge to an otherwise idyllic looking dale. Utilitarian concrete control buildings sat below them, and it was anyone's guess what was beneath the ground. Jenkins knew the cave systems around here spread out halfway to Bradford, and he couldn't believe they'd have built up but not down. Padrone could be beneath him now, descending towards the site's control hub. But to what end?

As they got closer, Jenkins could make out the sheep peacefully grazing in the shadow of the globes. The whole site would be impressive enough in an industrial setting, but clashing with the countryside as it did it was truly dizzying. The snow globes looked like they had just landed in the field from a distant star. An alien invasion force sneaking into Britain through the back door, taking out grazing sheep and farm hands first before mounting an attack force to take on the nearest hamlet!

Of course, Jenkins had seen the communications between his people and the Yanks. Or, at least, some of them. He knew the towering globes contained some of the most sophisticated communication and monitoring aerals on the planet. A little piece of Cold War paranoia right in the heart of the English countryside.

As they pulled up to the security gate, Jenkins wondered what it was Professor Padrone wanted to listen out for here. Or, who he wanted to get a message to.

It had been surprisingly easy for Jenkins to get past the site security. All it had taken was his best winning smile and some patter about a fact finding visit from the Ministry. *'Just working in the local office and thought I'd pop by for a catch*

up.’ Lucky for Jenkins, that kind of snooping about covered for by a bit of bluster and an excuse for some Old Boy networking was par for the course for the way the Ministry operated. He thought raising his suspicions about Professor Padrone on the gate would close doors rather than open them, so had kept all that to himself.

It had taken a little longer to slip away from his designated keeper though. The guide was a Junior Officer by the name of Tarrant who had seemed like an alright type. Jenkins felt bad for the bother he’d probably landed him in. But time was pressing.

Jenkins had made small talk for as long as he could manage, before asking Tarrant if there had been any other visitors on site that day. According to the officer, a fellow by the name of Masters had been escorted down to the transmission mainframe that morning. *‘Just scheduled routine maintenance. Nothing out of the ordinary.’* This Masters matched Padrones description – bearded, slicked back hair and a commanding air. *‘Although, no, now you come to mention it, I don’t remember when it was scheduled...’*

As soon as he’d heard this, Jenkins was itching to lose Tarrant and make his own way to the transmission mainframe.

It had taken all the guile he could muster, but eventually Jenkins was hotfooting it through the lower reaches of Menwith Hill towards the mainframe. His footsteps echoed around him in the cavernous base. As he turned a corner, Jenkins stopped dead. He could have sworn he heard something just there.

Standing stock still, he strained his ears. There is was again. The clanking of tools. And then – *‘He he he’* – someone chuckling to themselves before the clanking started up again!

Jenkins moved forward again, quickening his pace. But with speed came more noise as his heavy feet echoed louder. He must have disturbed the phantom chuckler as he heard the unmistakable thud of a tool being dropped, followed by the echo of feet quickstepping towards him. His heart beat fast as fate approached him.

Jenkins was frozen to the spot now, doing his best to steel himself for the coming confrontation.

The approaching footsteps froze too. Jenkins strained his eyes and saw an imposing figure just on the edge of the shadows before him.

‘P-padrone? Is that you?’ He shook his head, then tried with more confidence, ‘I’m on to you! You know you won’t get away with this.’

That laugh again. Echoing from the shadows, it taunted him now.

‘Get away with what, exactly, young man?’

‘Well, with whatever it is that you’re up to!’ Jenkins rolled his eyes at himself. Come on, he thought, you’re risking everything for this. Have a bit of gravitas! ‘It doesn’t matter if I don’t know all the details of your plan. I’m on to you and I’ve filed a report. That’s enough to trigger an investigation, at least. So your best course of action is just to come clean to me now. It’ll be easier for you that way.’

‘It’s Jenkins, isn’t it?’ The voice was smooth and languid, not at all concerned by the pressure he was trying to exert. ‘My dear Jenkins, you have no idea at all, do you? I wouldn’t waste a confession on a piddling little thing like you. Why, it’s hardly worth my time to gloat.’

‘You don’t know what you’re risking here, Padrone. I could end your career just with what I’ve seen so far.’

‘Career? Pha!’ Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the figure crept forwards out of the shadows as he spoke. Inching closer to Jenkins with each syllable, the shadows shifted across the face of the man known as Padrone, revealing his dark, immaculately kept beard and heavy, commanding eyes. ‘Your concerns are not mine. My intentions are beyond you. Can you imagine having to live among sheep every day for months? Listen to them talk about the quality of grass? Compare corners of the field? That is what I have endured. But, alas, it was necessary whilst I was working towards my own ends.’

‘T-to what ends?’ Jenkins mouth was dry as he spoke and he suddenly felt very cold.

‘Mine is a design you could not possibly begin to comprehend. And I am working to a tight schedule. So if you’ll excuse me, I have a message to send.’

With a casual motion, the figure reached out towards Jenkins and placed a hand on the side of his neck. A sharp crack echoed. Jenkins fell to the floor, still.

Dusk had long settled in and Ron once again cursed his luck as he drove out towards his next stop. The last collection for Davey’s route should have been in hours back. When he finally caught up with him, Davey would be in for it! A swift half before heading back to the depot, no doubt. And then he had just lost track of time. But the usual haunts had turned up nothing, so now Ron found himself racing round the collection route checking the pick up to find out what had gone wrong. All mail collected so far, nothing but empty boxes. As it should

be.

He screeched to a halt at the station and climbed out of his van. A streetlight over the post box drew a spot around it, and Ron's shadow bent at a right-angle to rise up on the wall behind.

He reached out with his master key, but before he could try to turn it the door creaked open on contact.

Inside, mail was still piled high. Envelopes, the odd small package and a smattering of postcards fell out towards him. And on top of the pile, with a tiny face frozen in terror, was a ... a miniature postman.

'Jesus wept,' cursed Ron.

Dusk had crept in quickly as Susan Foreman walked home along the red-bricked backstreets of Shoreditch. Regretting taking a shortcut now, she tried to quicken her pace without making it look like she was hurrying. It had taken a lot of work to convince her grandfather to let her explore on her own here and eventually even enrol in a school. This was the most freedom she'd enjoyed since they'd started running. But she always felt torn between wanting even more freedom and craving the safety of TARDIS. The reassuring white noise of its electronic background hum and the stillness of its artificially generated air was like being held in a gentle hug.

Out here, jagged shapes and conflicting noises fought to overburden her senses. The people were strange and they looked at her as if she were stranger still. It was so exciting! But it was also overwhelming.

Outside a Tube station, evening commuters pushed past each other, heads down and intent on their own continuous forward motion. A newspaper seller hollered unintelligible noise, stood behind a bold-lettered bill reading 'Man Found Dead at Military Base'. Across the road, teenagers huddled in groups under streetlights, chattering and laughing to each other. Susan longed to join them, but had no idea how.

That evening, it had felt like too much, so Susan had ducked away from the main streets and was rushing back to her cocoon, hidden in plain sight at the back of Totters Lane junkyard.

But darkness seemed to be rushing in too, and, as her plimsolls pattered down that back street, Susan felt the growing sense that she was being watched. Pinpricks of terror shot into her back and she froze on the spot as the sharp clang

of metal on cobble echoed around her. Her breath short and rapid, Susan forced herself to turn towards the source of the sound.

Below a greasy street lamp were a couple of bins, one with its lid on the ground now. That must have been all it was, she thought. She let the tension in her body ease off slightly, but then she heard a rustle behind the bins. A great shadow rose up across the wall behind them, cast by the orange glow of the lamp above.

Fear rose again within Susan along with the shadow. Near nine feet tall with arched back and tail reaching even higher. What was this nocturnal horror revealed before her?

Susan couldn't contain herself any longer and let out a piercing scream. Her larynx burning, the scream went on for so long she had to draw breath halfway through. As it reverberated across the night, the shadow creature joined in with a wowl only a semitone lower and their cacophonous duet filled the air.

Then, with a rattle and a clatter, the shadow sunk back and a small cat appeared on top of the lid that still sat in place on one of the bins.

Susan stopped her screaming, took a few moments to get her breath back and wipe away a tear. Then, she laughed.

'You silly thing, you scared me half to death!' Bending forwards, she made cooing noises and reached her hand out towards the cat as an offer of friendship.

It mewed back at her in reply and walked forwards, rubbing its face against Susan's outstretched hand, then pattering closer still and leaning its back against her legs.

'Silly puss-puss, hiding like that.' Susan thought for half a breath, then continued, 'Would you like to come home with me? I'm sure grandfather wouldn't mind. I could feed you and pet you and oh... it would be such fun.'

Without waiting a moment, the cat leapt up into the arms of Susan Foreman and continued to rub up against her, nestling into her neck now.

Feeling much safer, Susan continued down the road with her new companion, onwards to Totters Lane.

Susan's footsteps echoed further off into the distance. With no one else around to hear, more rustling and clattering came up from behind the bins, lost in the night. And alongside the clatter, a distinctive laugh – '*He he he*'.

Upon reaching Totters Lane, Susan cautiously glanced right and left checking she wasn't being observed, just as her grandfather had taught her. All the while, her new friend rubbed up against her in her arms and Susan had to blow the cats curling tail out of the way to see clearly. When she was sure they were alone and unobserved, she creaked ajar the gate of the junkyard they stood before and ducked inside.

She weaved her way through the chaos of junk towards TARDIS, hidden away at the heart of the site. Spotting a familiar figure walking the other way towards them, she called out.

'Grandfather! Look what I found.'

Her grandfather was a small man with a shock of bright white hair and oddly old-fashioned looking clothing.

'My dear child, where on earth did you find that thing?' As he spoke, a series of small nervous movements with his hands betrayed that his mind was elsewhere, or perhaps in several different places – he rubbed at the lapels of his frock coat, pattered down the front of his shirt and rubbed his thumb and forefinger together as if to conjure forth his thoughts. 'Why, you should know better than to bring strays back with you, hmmm.'

Susan looked sullen, shoulders hunched and bottom lip pouting slightly.

'Oh, grandfather. It's my friend. I thought it could live here with us.'

'In the junkyard? I dare say there are rats enough to keep the thing fed.'

Susan looked incredulous at the thought of making the cat sleep outdoors amongst the rubbish.

'No grandfather. In TARDIS! I thought I could keep it as a pet.'

'What! Under no circumstances can you bring anything from this world into TARDIS. I forbid it!'

Susan whimpered as her grandfather scolded her. The cat jumped from her arms and sat between them observing, its tail flicking behind it as if of a separate intelligence.

'Come now child, don't be upset.' The old man reached his arms out towards Susan and waved her in towards him for a hug. 'There, now. Though why you would want to take in a lower lifeform like this is beyond me. Hmmm.'

As the old man held his granddaughter, the cat suddenly darted past them deeper into the junkyard and towards TARDIS.

'Kitty! Wait!' cried Susan as she pulled out of her grandfather's arms and ran

after it.

The cat traced a sure path through the maze of junk and off towards the object they called TARDIS. It looked just like a dusty old Police Telephone Box, forgotten and left to go to rot and ruin. Susan and her grandfather were just a few paces behind when the cat sprang upwards.

In a single bound, it leapt up onto the top of the box and sat down next to the light on the centre of its roof.

Susan stood on her tiptoes, reaching towards the cat. She cooed and made beckoning gestures with her outreached hand.

‘Come down now puss-puss, it’s not safe up there.’

But the cat stood stock still and upright. Susan felt a chill shoot down her neck as the cat’s eyes started to glow. Alongside that, the light on top of TARDIS began to flash and a strange wheezing groaning noise rumbled through the junkyard.

Above them, clouds began to swirl in and around each other like the vortex of a storm. The air pressure shifted dramatically and Susan felt her hearing dull like her ears were about to pop.

Her grandfather fumbled around in his pockets, searching frantically for the key to TARDIS.

But his search was interrupted as a malevolent figure stepped out from the shadows towards them, laughing as it approached.

‘Halt!’

It was the figure of a policeman. His bulky uniform and tall helmet cast a long, jagged shadow amidst the uneven lighting of the junkyard.

‘Don’t take a step closer to that box.’

‘Now look here officer,’ Susan’s grandfather blustered, ‘this is a decommissioned Police Box and this, erm, yard is private property. So if you’ll kindly see to make your way—’

‘My dear Doctor,’ the policeman cut him off. ‘You’re not quite the man I expected, but it’s always a pleasure when our paths cross. Such a pity this will have to be the last.’ Reading the blank faces in front of him, the policeman continued, ‘I can see I have you at a disadvantage. Perhaps, if I were to do *this...*’ And with a flourish, the policeman removed his helmet with one hand, nodding forwards in a half-bow. Then, as he stood upright he reached under his chin with the other hand and, digging his fingernails in, whipped off a perfectly fitted facemask.

Dropping the contents of both hands to his side, the true identity of the

policeman was revealed. His face; dark eyes, neatly trimmed beard, the very picture of evil. And again he laughed, 'He he he.'

'Young man, you may know me but I am afraid I have no idea who you are,' Susan's grandfather insisted. 'And, hmm, as such, we have no quarrel with you. Now whatever is going on, if you'll just leave us be and allow us to go on our way, we'll hear no more of the matter.'

The bearded man frowned.

'Oh Doctor, you know me. You know me very well. You see, I am the Master!'

'That's as may be,' the old man retorted. 'But you're certainly not the master of me! Now, I say again, let us be on our way and we'll forget all of this nonsense.'

'Did your time in the Matrix short-circuit something? Why, I am your...' The man that called himself the Master stopped himself. He held his breath to catch his frustration.

This had been years in the making and was to be his final revenge. All that time spent posing as Padrone to lay his plans, he'd been sure his nemesis was due here next in their relative timelines. The initial bridgehead established from Menwith Hill had been enough for the Kittling to reach this dull planet that he seemed so fond of. And then he would use his enemy's own TARDIS to open a gateway for the rest of the hordes. How sweet it would be to see the horror on his old rivals face knowing the part he had played in the destruction of this planet before finally being disposed of himself!

But this man really didn't know who he was. Composing himself, he stood tall and fixed Susan's grandfather with an icy stare. 'Before this night is through Doctor, you *will* know me as the Master and you will never forget who I am!'

The vortex above them swirled more violently. The wind picked up, causing scraps of junk dotted around the yard to dance around them. Susan leaned into her grandfather, wrapped under his arm and clinging tightly to him. On top of TARDIS, the cat's eyes glowed like twin stars guiding the way in the night. The Master tipped his head back and laughed, fully and deeply.

Above them, a gap opened in the air as space folded in on itself like a cosmic cat flap, linking one point in the universe to another.

Out of the gap dived a creature on horseback. Humanoid in outline but covered in ragged fur. Giant paws pulled back on reigns as the horse reared up. The creature showed great strength bringing it back under control. With an angry hiss, the rider exposed its large pointed teeth. It dug its heels into the side of the

horse and lashed hard with the reigns to drive it forwards.

Susan screamed and clung more tightly to her grandfather.

‘Grandfather, it looks like a Cheetah with a man’s body. It’s awful!’

Still laughing, the Master took a step back. Pouring out of the gap and flowing forwards between them and TARDIS came more and more of the creatures, a mounted army of humanoid horrors. They fell out into the night, spreading from the junkyard out across the capital like a tsunami crashing over everything in their path.

Susan felt her grandfather shake her and push her away.

‘Quick Susan, now’s our chance. Run, child. Run!’ Cut off from TARDIS by the invading horde, they darted away from the Master and into the shadows of the junkyard, Susan two steps ahead of her grandfather who was panting and fussing at his brow already.

The Cheetah People spread out into the night, yowling with glee at the freedom of a fresh hunting ground. The hooves of their horses clattered like breaking thunder against cobbled backstreets, pounding on into Spitalfields and further towards the river.

Charging through Spitalfields Market, the feline horrors cut down bodies with abandon. Market workers, busy stacking and cleaning, dropped what they were doing and fled as panic spread. As the pack drove out West, the game was more abundant but less of a challenge. Confusion reigned and bodies fell.

The fur of the hunters was matted wet and warm now with the blood of their quarry. Their hearts beat fast and as one with the adrenaline of the endless hunt.

Meanwhile, back on Totters Lane Susan and her grandfather cowered in a dark corner of the junkyard they had made their home. In the distance, blood curdling screams filled the night air.

Susan whimpered and pleaded with her grandfather, but to no avail.

‘Grandfather! You have to do something.’ She pulled at him as she spoke. But despite his seemingly frail form her grandfather stood firm.

‘Hush child, you knew when we left our home we would see many strange things. To your eyes this is evil, hmm? Must it be fought? Must we step in every

time we see injustice?’ Warming to his theme, he rubbed at his lapel with one hand whilst the other pontificated. ‘Why, the universe is infinite. And we wander through it in the fourth dimension. We will see good, yes, and beauty. But we will also see much that seems wrong, my dear. If we were to step in once we should step in every time and we would do nothing but interfere!’

Susan did not look convinced and pouted imploringly.

‘But people are dying...’

‘People die in every moment of history. Would you have me save them all? Hmm? The ship was designed to observe, nothing more. Now, we must return to it.’ He finished decisively and ushered Susan along the edge of the shadows. Downhearted, she accepted and they silently skulked back towards TARDIS.

‘Look,’ pointed Susan as they reached the ship, ‘Puss-puss is still sat on top of TARDIS.’

‘Never mind that now, we must get inside.’ Her grandfather stepped forward and reached his key towards the door of the Police Box. But his action was interrupted.

‘Going somewhere, Doctor?’

The man who called himself the Master leapt forward and paced towards Susan’s grandfather. The two men looked intently at each other, one with focus and hatred, the other with confusion. They circled around each other like a pair of big cats sizing each other up. One puffing his chest out and posing as the Alpha, the other holding his hands out in supplication.

‘Don’t think you can fool me, Doctor. I’ve gone to a lot of effort to reach out to these creatures and have planned for every eventuality. This will be my final revenge and my final victory!’

‘Whatever you have planned, my granddaughter and I do not belong here. We are no threat to you.’

‘Come on Doctor! I know you’re bluffing! You will give me the satisfaction of knowing why you’re dying.’ But as confusion gave way to abject fear on the face of his victim, the Master roared in frustration. He threw his hands up and turned away. ‘You really don’t know who I am, do you?’ he eventually sighed.

At that moment they were interrupted by a Cheetah Person, cut off from its pack and panting. On foot and lost but high from the hunt, it reared towards the Master.

He held his hand forward commandingly.

‘I am your Master! It is I who sent the message out and brought you here.’ The creature understood and backed down. But then it sniffed the air thoughtfully. Turning towards Susan and her grandfather, something close to a grin crossed its face.

The Master pointed a finger towards the one he called the Doctor.

‘His death will be mine, but the moment is not ready yet. Hold yourself, beast.’

But the Cheetah Person stalked forward regardless, its bloodlust up.

‘No, I am your Master! You will obey me!’

Susan’s grandfather scrambled backwards. Tripping, he fell at his granddaughter’s feet. The creature crouched, readying itself to attack.

Panicking now, the Master’s eyes darted about. Eventually, they locked on the cat still sat atop TARDIS. Its eyes still glowing bright in the darkness.

As the Cheetah person pounced, so too did the Master. Diving with instinct rather than thought, he reached up towards the cat and grabbed at its scruff. Baring its teeth and claws, the cat lashed out. But the Master held tight as they tumbled to the floor.

The light in the cat’s eyes cut out as the link between it and the ship was broken.

With the link broken. The doorway began to close. The vortex in the sky above the junkyard turned counter-clockwise. Susan’s ears popped sharply. And in a moment, the Cheetah People were gone. And so was the Master.

Across London it was still, like the calm following a storm. Survivors stumbled through the streets, not quite sure what had just happened to them. They looked to one another with confusion, eyes searching for confirmation that they’d seen the same thing.

Gradually the atmosphere began to change. Shock gave way to determination as the focus fell on tending to the fresh wound of the city. What had caused that wound was pushed out of mind. After all, it made no sense anyway. How else would you be able to get on?

Back in Totters Lane, Susan asked her grandfather where the creatures had

disappeared to.

‘I don’t know, but I should think by the time they get back here we shall be long gone,’ he smiled.

‘But what about the people here?’ Susan wondered. Still shaken by what had just happened, the concern was clearly visible in her.

‘Hmm?’ Her grandfather looked up from unlocking the Police Box door. ‘Susan, dear child, they really are no concern of ours!’ And with that, he ducked out of the night and into the sanctuary of his ship.

As they opened the door of the box, the artificial light from inside drew a shaft that cut across the junkyard. In a corner of the yard, the light caught something and illuminated it.

A glowing pair of cats’ eyes, watching.